BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

THE NIGHT OF THE LORD

Elise Aylen

GENERAL EDITORS

K. M. MUNSHI
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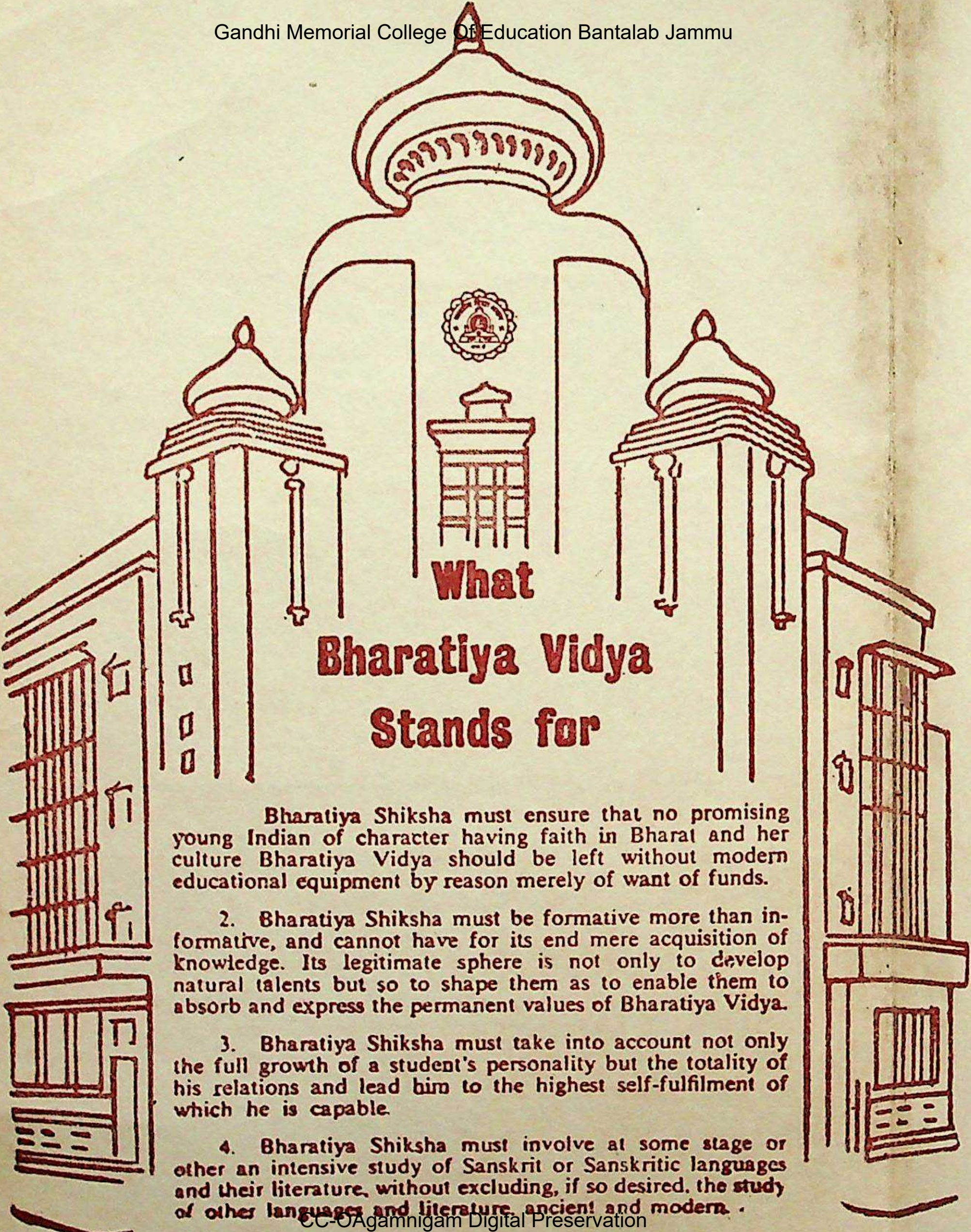
BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN, BOMBAY



What Bharatiya Vidya Stands for

Bharatiya Shiksha must ensure that no promising young Indian of character having faith in Bharat and her culture Bharatiya Vidya should be left without modern educational equipment by reason merely of want of funds.

2. Bharatiya Shiksha must be formative more than informative, and cannot have for its end mere acquisition of knowledge. Its legitimate sphere is not only to develop natural talents but so to shape them as to enable them to absorb and express the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya.

3. Bharatiya Shiksha must take into account not only the full growth of a student's personality but the totality of his relations and lead him to the highest self-fulfilment of which he is capable.

4. Bharatiya Shiksha must involve at some stage or other an intensive study of Sanskrit or Sanskritic languages and their literature, without excluding, if so desired, the study of other languages and literature, ancient and modern.

5. The re-integration of Bharatiya Vidya, which is the primary object of Bharatiya Shiksha, can only be attained through a study of forces, movements, motives, iddas, forms and art of creative life-energy through which it has expressed itself in different ages as a single continuous process.

6. Bharatiya Shiksha must stimulate the student's power of expression, both written and oral, at every stage in accordance with the highest ideals attained by the great literary masters in the intellectual and moral spheres.

7 The technique of Bharatiya Shiksha must involve—

(a) the adoption by the teacher of the *Guru* attitude which consists in taking a personal interest in the student; inspiring and encouraging him to achieve distinction in his studies; entering into his life with a view to form ideals and remove psychological obstacles; and creating in him a spirit of consecration, and

(b) the adoption by the student of the *Shishya* attitude by the development of—

(i) respect for the teacher,

(ii) a spirit of inquiry,

(iii) a spirit of service towards the teacher, the institution, Bharat and Bharatiya Vidya.

8. The ultimate aim of Bharatiya Shiksha is to teach the younger generation to appreciate and live up to the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya which flowing from the supreme art of creative life-energy as represented by Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha and Mahavira have expressed themselves in modern times in the life of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi.

9. Bharatiya Shiksha while equipping the student with every kind of scientific and technical training must teach the student, not to sacrifice an ancient form or attitude to an unreasoning passion for change; not to retain a form or attitude which in the light of modern times can be replaced by another form or attitude which is a truer and more effective expression of the spirit of Bharatiya Vidya; and to capture the spirit afresh for each generation to present it to the world

आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः ।

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

—Rigveda I-89-i

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By

ELISE AYLEN

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By

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages and was to be priced at Rs. 1.75*.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting itself to the utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions that allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the framework of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

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* Since raised to Rs. 2.50.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspirations which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books from other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, besides the movements of the Indian mind, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita*, by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who does not know it does not know the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas the climax of which is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone, the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

K. M. MUNSHI

1, QUEEN VICTORIA ROAD,
NEW DELHI:
3rd October 1951.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The verses, "Why standest thou to meet the King" have appeared previously, under the title "Blind", in *Prabuddha Bharata*, Calcutta; "There was moonlight in the glade of the woodland", under the title "A Vision of Krishna", *Mysindia*, Bangalore.

I am much indebted to "Pattupattu", translation from the classic Tamil poets by J. V. Chelliah, Ceylon, for a picture of life in early Tamilnad.

Coonoor:
January 1, 1967

ELISE AYLEN

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To

SWAMI

YOGESHWARANANDA

With Devotion

This is the story of a journey of which one can see neither the beginning nor the end, but only certain of its resting places.

1

KATARAGAMA

Time — The Present

I had come down from Kandy in a torrent of rain, and the rain was still falling, though not so heavily, when I reached the coast. The road ran almost at the water's edge. On one side the high painted fishing-boats were drawn up along the shore, on the other were the low huts of the fishermen, thatched with palm leaves. The fishermen themselves one could see, in their spare moments, walking up and down the road, with spindles dangling and twirling, as they wound, endlessly, a yarn from coconut fibre.

The rain had stopped now, and the sky was barred and gilded with broken clouds, cutting the red disk of the sun, and streaking the dappled waters with ominous blood-red stains.

It was dark when I reached Galle where I spent the night. In the morning I saw it a white and shining little town, full of golden sunlight, with great grass-grown bulwarks built against the breaking sea. Within the harbour all was quiet; my window looked out on its moveless reaches, where the long jetties, with red-tiled roofs laid a double line upon the waters. But no ships unload there now.

Coming out of Galle on the Matara road we went through long avenues of coconut groves with large square comfortable looking houses, set in low white-walled compounds full of flowers and tall flowering trees. They look-

N.-1

ed so solid and so restful, and the light fell so beautifully upon them, filtered through the green-gold of the palm-leaves, that I began to weigh the advantages of a settled existence against my own vagrancy. For a moment I longed for home, for such a home as these. Then, round the back of a headland, the road swung out again to the sea and the waves and the shining sands and the limitless horizon; and I knew there was no resting-place with which I could ever be satisfied.

I passed Dondra Head, the most southerly point of Ceylon, that looks out and away, across half a world of waters, straight to the southern pole. On this headland of old there was a great temple to the "Moon-God", or perhaps to Vishnu, "the size of a handsome city", so the old Portuguese historian tells us, with a thousand images of gilded clay and wood and bronze, terraces with many flowers, and tall towers roofed with copper. Alas it was destroyed, utterly laid waste by his countrymen, the first men from the West who fell upon these shores. They polluted the site by slaughtering cattle there, so that the temple might never be rebuilt.

Beyond Hambantota the road turned inland through a level thorny waste of dry, scrubby jungle and stunted trees, almost uninhabited, the haunt of wild peacocks and great grey apes, more rarely now of elephants—the ivory and apes and peacocks that ladened the ships of Solomon.

I came to Tissamaharama as the dusk was falling, but I could see the great dagoba, the Mahanaga, one of the oldest Buddhist shrines in Ceylon, rising like a great half-moon above the level rice-fields. A line of pilgrims in bright garments were circling round it, bearing their offering of flowers.

The rest-house was on the shore of a large "tank", a lake made by damming a stream. Here there was a bird-sanctuary, and on a little island, not far out, the white egrets were settling for the night, like blossoms on the long, twisted boughs of leafless trees.

But it was not these things I had come to see.

The next day, towards evening, I set off again, this time in a bullock-cart, for the car could go no further.

It was a gay little cart with painted wheels and yoke, and a fringe of scarlet balls hanging from the palm-thatched top. We had a sturdy pair of light-brown bullocks with brass-tipped horns, and nose-reins of crimson cord. The reins were threaded through their nostrils and tied to the yoke of the cart, and must have been very uncomfortable. The driver wore a scarlet shirt, and a red-and-yellow striped bathtowel wound about his dark head. After a while he discarded the towel in favour of a very old and battered hat of the cowboy type, turned up at one side, in which he looked quite dashing. There was a small boy riding with him, whose duty it was to keep him awake, for we were going all night through the jungle.

The bottom of the cart was spread with clean straw on which I laid a sheet, and as long as the road was good it was comfortable enough, but after a little the road became more rugged and the cart lurched alarmingly. Once or twice I thought we were over, but it managed to right itself again, and the driver took it all quite as a matter of course.

Two little brass bells hung dangling from the inside of the roof, and at first I thought their sound quite delightful, but the jingling grew louder as the road grew rougher. With every lurch their din became terrific, and at last I was obliged to tie them up to the ridge-pole with strips of cotton torn from the sheet, to spare my own jangling nerves.

A bullock-cart, even a gay one, is a slow conveyance, and it took nearly till midnight to cover the long stretch of jungle road that led to the great festival of Kataragama.

We passed one or two other carts coming or going, but for the most part the pilgrims went on foot carrying bundles and waterpots and children. Some, in fulfilment of a vow, had walked great distances bearing on their shoulders a great, arched yoke called a kavadi decked with flowers and peacock feathers; for the peacock is sacred to the God. I saw women also, with shaven heads, carrying in their hands long staves, tipped with a single plume. They also had made their vow to Kataragama.

Instead of the "sadu...sadu", the cry of the Buddhists, which I had heard in other sacred places of Ceylon, they cried out to one another constantly in passing "Hara...Hara ...The Lord...The Lord", for these people were Hindus and Kataragama is a Hindu God. He has other names, Kartikeya or Skanda, and he is the God of War, for he fought and conquered the Asuras, the forces of evil. Local tradition places the conflict in this spot. More anciently perhaps he is the Nature God, the Lord of Generation, and a form or "son" of Shiva. His earliest shrine was on a hill, above the river where the festival is now held, and he is called sometimes simply "He of the Hill". He is thus linked with the old hill-god of the Veddahs, the wild people of the jungle who are his guardians. He came, they say, to Ceylon in some morning of the world, "And when he came he told us the names of things, of trees and animals and how we should make offerings and dance to him. He told us everything we know".

About half-way to the shrine we stopped at a certain point to offer a coconut. It is thrown against a sharp stone, and if it splits open, it is a favourable omen.

Ours did not break.

Here and there along the road were several caddies, little wayside shops made entirely of palm-leaves. They supplied the needs of the pilgrims, who sat in small groups cooking their supper over fires of twigs.

Later, as it grew dark we passed silent sheeted forms, like rows of corpses laid out by the roadside. But they were only pilgrims who had grown weary and lain down to sleep. No one hurried, for the festival went on for ten days.

At last we reached a small river, the Maenik-Ganga. I left the bullock cart and crossed a swaying bridge of bamboos lashed together with cords, and climbed a steep bank on the other side.

I had come to the festival.

Directly at my right hand was a great hollow stump of a tree, with an altar before it. Here I made an offering, and a young priest sprinkled my forehead with ashes. He was tall and slim and of an almost feminine beauty, naked to the waist, with long curling black locks bound up on top of his head.

In the hollow of the tree-trunk had once been found the Goddess Valliyamma, like another Ariel, "pegged in its knotty entrails". It was no book-learned Prospero "that made gape the pine and let thee out", but the wild Veddahs succoured her and reared her until Kartikeya came, fresh from his victory over the Asuras, and loved her and married her.

Beside the open tree-shrine was a temple enclosed by a high wall, where pipes and drums were playing, and they were answered by other drummings farther off.

Across the pathway was another, larger shrine where again I was sprinkled with ashes and touched with oil, and my forehead anointed with a crimson paste made of lime and saffron.

From here a pathway led up between a double line of shrines and temples, some of them merely stone cells, to the great main temple, the Maha Dewale. The whole enclosure was as large as a fair-sized village, and was thronged with pilgrims. Everywhere there was the flare of torches, and before the shrines the steadier light of many small lamps fed with ghi, burning with a pale, silent flame. The air was heavy with the scent of many garlands, great golden marigolds and champak and jasmine, and the fragrant white and gold "temple flowers". Overhead the moon, nearing the full, shone through faint clouds.

From shrine to shrine men and women and sometimes children were running quickly, one behind the other, bearing each in one hand a jar of fire, an earthen jar from which flames kept shooting up. Beneath the jar was a spray of fresh kadamba leaves. The leaves are sacred to Kataragama and ritually purifying; also they keep the hot jar from burning the hand. Before each altar they laid down the jar, prostrated themselves, murmured some prayer or incantation, then rose, took up the jar and ran on. Their aim was to visit all the shrines before the fire went out.

Although mine was the only white face amid all that dark throng, I attracted little attention until I came to the shrine of the Goddess Patini, of the Golden Anklets, who traces her descent through various forms to the Veddah Giri-Amma, the Hill-Mother.

Here I met one of the "kapuwas", those possessed by the God, who become temporarily his mouth-piece. This man was oddly dressed, in a full flounced skirt, with a wig of purple hair hanging down his back in a long braid. On his head he bore a large brass water jar, decked with flowers and filled to the brim with water, and he danced, swaying this way and that, yet not a drop fell. His cheeks were stained with purple dye, and his lips hung loosely, and his eyes were staring and rolling. A man with a small hand-drum led him about, sounding the drum from time to time with quick staccato beats. The kapuwa is gifted with prophecy and will foretell the future or divulge the past to those who inquire of him.

There was a murmur of excitement in the crowd when he stopped before me, and quickly a little circle formed around us. The drum beat faster and the kapuwa took a little of the sacred ashes from the jar he held in his hand and sprinkled it over my head. With his body continually swaying his eyes sought my face, then suddenly he laid his hand on my forehead. A strong shudder ran through him, and like an electric shock I felt it through my own body. At last, still swaying he spoke a few words which someone translated. "He says you have come from very far, and he knows what it is you seek" I wished he would tell me, for I scarcely knew myself, but he only mumbled something. "He says you must go on."

Yes, I must go on. I had no doubt of that.

Others pressed forward, eager to put their own questions, and he was soon drawn away in the throng.

Slowly I made my way up the crowded street, stopping at several other shrines, and before each my head was sprinkled with ashes. No one questioned me or asked what I did there. I had come to the festival of the God, and

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I was under his protection. Perhaps because it is a low-caste festival, and Brahmins do not come there, it is not hedged about with the usual restrictions.

At the end of the street I came out into a large open space before the Maha Dewale, the great temple, which stood at the far side, in the centre, with a smaller temple at the left and right of it. There was more room here, and a little way off I could see two women dancing a strange crouching dance facing one another with knees and elbows spread wide. Their lips were drawn back in a set ecstatic grin, and through each protruding tongue was thrust a long skewer. Their fixed, staring eyes were held each by the other's gaze, and they seemed oblivious of anything else.

These women were not trained ascetics or members of any religious order, but just common coolie-women, such as one might see anywhere working on the tea plantations, only their heads were shaven and they held the peacock staves in their hands. The God is no respecter of persons and seizes whom He will.

Suddenly at one side a path opened through the crowd and along it came another kapuwa, a slight, haggard-looking man, naked except for a brief, white loincloth. His head and body were smeared with ashes; and all down his arms and in a double row across his chest and down his back to his waist-cloth, were hundreds of tiny darts, drawn through his flesh. Into his lower lip and through both cheeks were thrust short light daggers; and this was not all. Two hooks, attached to long cords, were hooked into his back, just below the shoulders, and by these he was drawing behind him a small painted cart, holding an image of the God. He came very slowly yet without great effort, and there was no look of pain on his face, only a great intentness and a certain weariness. He was much wilder looking than the other kapuwa, his eyes gleamed more luridly and all the ritual that followed was carried out at a much higher pitch. Those who came to him flung themselves downward in the dust, and when he stopped before me the crowd motioned me to do likewise. But perhaps a little foolhardily I stood my ground. The kapuwa raised his eyes and looked at me steadily. I returned his gaze. He was not at all angered at my resistance to him, only a little disturbed as if he were searching in his mind for something, or perhaps in some one else's mind. After a moment he shook his head, and spoke a few words, hardly above a whisper, looking at me piercingly all the time. My interpreter explained anxiously, "He says it is not of this world, what you seek. It is not of this world."

The kapuwa was on the point of speaking again, when a man burst through the crowd in a frenzy of excitement, stripped himself to the waist, and flung himself on the ground before the kapuwa, who then turned that peering gaze upon him and sprinkled a few drops of water into his up-turned, opened mouth. The excitement all around me increased. The kapuwa, resting his hand on the shoulders of the suppliant began leaping into the air. He was now in full frenzy. He spoke quickly and breathlessly in answer to questions put to him in the same breathless way. The dagger in his lower lip waggled horribly as he spoke. I too felt myself caught into the same excitement that surged around me, creating conditions in which anything was possible. Then suddenly it was over. The suppliant rose and put on his garments, though he still panted as if he had been running. The kapuwa went on slowly and wearily, dragging his God. But I was to see him again in another place.

The mutilations which these possessed people inflict on themselves lack the horror of other wounds, for, whatever the reason, they neither bleed nor fester, and a scar forms almost immediately.

I went now to the Maha Dewale and entered a wide low doorway. The temple was dark and old, a single, pillared hall with a sanctuary at one end. Before the sanctuary, which was raised several feet about the level of the hall, seven curtains are hung. On the outer-most one, the only one visible to the worshippers, is the painted figure of the God in his character of Muruga, the Beautiful One, the Eternally Young. Before him many lamps were burning, row upon row, lighting up the dim temple, with a fitful glare.

The place was filled with pilgrims, crowded together in a solid mass, chanting and crying out as they pressed foreward to the threshhold of the holy place, there to be anointed by the ministering priests.

Drums beat out their dull, aching rhythm that seemed like a thorb within one's own brain, and the shrill Tamil pipes thrust their incessant, penetrating note pitilessly into one's consciousness. I leaned back against a pillar and from this support, which kept me from being forced on by the throng, I gazed at the wild worshipping faces all around me. I noticed one man particularly, a very tall man, standing head and shoulders above all the rest. He was broad-shouldered with a gold-brown skin, and short, curling black hair like the God. He stood not far from me, with a flare of lamplight on his uplifted face, luminous with love and adoration. And he was singing with a full, golden voice a song of praise to Muruga. He looked quite rapt away from all the people round him, his gaze fixed and shining, his hands clasped, in mystic solitude he stood and sang to his God, in loneliness and blessedness.

I passed at last with the moving pilgrims up to the shrine, where I was anointed like the rest, and then went out by a small door at one side into the open air.

There were fewer people now, and there was no sign of the kapuwas. Only in a stall, near the back of the temple an elephant was being carefully arrayed for the procession with which the night's ceremonies would close.

I walked along the square and went into one of the other temples beside the Maha Dewale. Here there were images of Vishnu and one of the Buddha in Meditation. A single priest stood by this shrine. One or two people were making there their offering of flowers. The place was very quiet after the thronged Murugan temple. I went slowly up to the shrine where the priest was standing. He was a slight, elderly man, with long grizzled hair and beard, and he wore a yellow robe, not the white I had seen everywhere else. The other worshippers were gone away, and in the darkness and quietness I was alone before the priest. He sprinkled a few ashes upon me, then quietly, unexpectedly he laid both his hands upon my head. A great peace descended upon me; a sense of blessedness and serenity. Then he began to sing, his voice quavering a little, for he was old, but full of tenderness and devotion. I could not understand his words, yet I felt I knew their meaning, and it grew clearer and more clear as the chant went on, slow and calm, yet rising higher and higher in some mystic elation of joy and promise. I gave myself up to it in an ardour of devotion. Oh, I was blessed, I was blessed indeed, consecrated—as to an unknown task.

The priest's hands though laid so lightly on my head became heavier and heavier, till they were like some iron clasp upon my brain, and I felt that when he took them away, part of my mind would come away with them. But he released me gently at the last;—without any feeling of shock or sudden depression. I went away quietly, not without comfort. At the door, looking back, I saw him still standing there, looking after me, smiling a little, gently, a little surprised.

Outside there was a great noise again of pipes and drums. Crowds lined the street, leaving a passage in the centre for the procession which now came slowly with music and dancing. The single elephant came quietly, majestically, for these beasts are extraordinarily sensitive to a religious atmosphere, and take part in these many processions with the utmost dignity. Upon the elephant rode a priest called the Kapurale, bearing in his hand the sacred ark, a small gold casket the contents of which are never seen even by the priests. But it is believed to hold a golden tablet with a mystic sign graven upon it. The Kapurale had a piece of white gauze tied across his mouth that no breath of mortality might sully the holy thing. A small band of devotees formed a circle round them, within which were the dancers and musicians. The dancers wore no special costume and were not perhaps, professional, but only seized by the God. Some of them bore the plumed kavadis on their shoulders, and with bent heads they danced a swaying circular dance, rather slowly, without any stamping or violent movement.

Facing the elephant was a priest or ministrant, who of all those strange wild figures was the strangest and wildest. He was a little, lithe man, rather emaciated. He had a short tattered robe and long grey, wildly matted hair. In his two hands he held aloft a naked sword, horizontally, the hilt resting on one hand, the sharp point against the other; as it seemed, against a single finger. With his eyes fixed on the ark he danced lightly, joyously, almost capering, backwards over the rough ground without stumbling, without uncertainty. His body seemed almost without weight. I could see his darkly gleaming eyes and his parted laughing lips. While the bright blade of the sword shone, burnished by the flare of torches, like some mystic Excalibur.

This was the sacred sword, to be used on the last night of the festival to "cut" the water, when the ark is immersed in the river.

The procession passed and the crowd began to disperse. Some of the lamps went out and the place grew darker, but I could still hear from some of the temples the sound of drums and pipes, where dancing and chanting would probably go on all night.

So I went down slowly to the river. This time I did not cross on the bridge, but waded through the shallow waters, sprinkling myself from the holy stream as did the other pilgrims.

I found my bullock-cart, with boy and driver both asleep. I wakened them and we set off on our return journey through the moonlit jungle.

I lay in the cart thoughtfully, holding these experiences in my mind like the treasure hid in a field, or like the golden ark with its unknown, mysterious symbol, unknown even to the priest who bore it.

Where, I thought, could I find the interpreter who would explain to me the sign graven in my own mind?

2

THE NIGHT OF THE LORD

Time — The Past

Long ago, far in the past, along a dusty South Indian road, there came a child and his mother. The child's bare brown feet, shuffling in the soft golden dust of the roadway, stirred little shining dust-storms as he walked, and his mother, pulling gently at his hand, bade him lift his feet. He was weary but plodded steadily on with the unquestioning fortitude of childhood, only he asked, looking about him as if half bewildered at the strange surroundings, "Is it still far?"

His mother, whose head was bent with weariness, whose eyes were shadowed with foreboding, turned her mournful gaze toward the distant palms, whose fronds flashed in the sun as if they had been cut out of glass. From their midst rose the temple towers; and she answered softly, "Now we are nearly there. Take courage, Nallathan."

But the old servant, Muttusami, who trudged behind them, carrying a bundle over his shoulder and a waterpot slung on his arm, looked up hopefully, then scowled and muttered to himself, "Far — still far."

They had been travelling so long that it seemed sometimes to Nallathan he could scarcely remember their home in the city of Kanchi which they had left many months before on their long pilgrimage.

They had gone first to the hill temple of Palani, and made offerings there to Kataragama. They had visited so many other holy places in towns, on hills, by rivers, that no one could possibly remember them all. They had passed by Tanjore where the Big King lived, and where Nallathan's father was his minister. They had seen the vast palace with its subterranean river roaring through hollow dungeons, obscure and terrible, and the great temple with its enormous walls, and the shining weight of its massy tower, its stones not yet weathered by age. They had gone with prayers and offerings, in weariness and fear, fulfilling a vow his mother had made for his sake. They had gone mostly on foot, sometimes in a lumbering bullock-cart whose friendly driver took pity on the pilgrims, and to whom the mother related her son's great gifts. Already he could read the scriptures and write them too, though he had only reached his seventh year. At the mention of his age, her lips trembled.

Sometimes when they stopped at a village and the people gathered round them, at his mother's command the child with a pointed stick traced in the dust a sacred text, or the line of a hymn, while the simple folk looked on, admiringly, and were ready with their offers of a lodging for the night. Sometimes his mother, drawing a little away that he might not hear her, whispered to them through her tears of other things, of dark prophecies in the stars, and of a mysterious danger which threatened him in his seventh year; of how, hoping to avert it, they were making this year-long pilgrimage.

Now as they neared the sacred precinct of Rameshwaram, one of the holiest shrines in all India, the boy's flagging spirits revived, and he danced along the road, eager, and singing to himself. He wore only a red loincloth, and a red scarf twisted round his head to protect him from the sun. His skin gleamed golden brown in the sunlight, and his slender body was graceful as a bird's as he darted here and there. His delicate, finely modelled face and dark, lustrous, wistful eyes were turned from place to place with endless question. The journey to him was more of high adventure than a pilgrimage, though indeed he had heard more than his mother knew of her dread whispers, and of the danger that threatened him now, in this very year. But a child is easily made heavy and easily lightened, and now as he danced along he made up a little song and sang it gaily to himself, or to the skies or the trees or to the earth.

"Where is it,
The Evil thing,
And where does it lie?
Is it Nag that lies coiled at my feet,
With his deadly venom,
The hooded one, the wind-eater?
Is it the hidden death of water
Or the sudden cry at dusk?
Shall it rise up from the earth?
Shall it fall from the skies?
Shall it come from my own heart?
Surely the earth is full of kindness,
And the waters are pure,
And the sky is the abode of God.
Why then should I fear?
There is no fear at all,
For my life is the Lord's,
And in my heart
I am His — I am His."

As he ran back to take his mother's hand he saw that she had covered her face with her shoulder-cloth, and was weeping.

As they drew near the holy place they met other pilgrims coming from many directions for it was Shiva Ratri, the Night of Shiva, when vigil was kept in the temple from dusk to dawn. Most of them came from towns nearby, but some few from great distances, further even than Kanchi.

The temples which had looked so close in the morning light seemed to recede as the day advanced, and were lost in a haze of dust and heat. They were many hours still trudging by level fields with hedges of thick, creeping cactus, and by bare sandy hillocks, until they came to a stretch of water which they crossed in a heavy flat ferryboat, and then again on foot until at last they reached the little town.

The soil of the island was sacred and untouched by the plough or other cultivation, and the few people who made their home upon it lived by supplying the needs or fancies of the pilgrims. There were many shops and booths selling milk and grain and saffron, and coconuts, and lime-paste, and necklaces of the sacred cowrie shells picked up on the shore. But all was quiet now in the noonday heat. They went up the main thoroughfare, lined on either side by dharamshalas, pilgrim hostels, built by pious kings and devotees for the welfare of the pilgrims. They had all been newly whitewashed and were clean and shining.

They went into one of them, close to the temple. It had an inner court with a raised and covered cloister running round it, and in one of the little niches they settled themselves and unrolled their bundles and spread out their sleeping mats of light straw. Muttusami filled the waterpot from the well in the centre, and then went to buy food, and dried dung-cakes to make their fire.

Other pilgrims were already sleeping in many of the niches, and Nallathan and his mother also lay down for they were very tired.

All were hushed in the noonday sleep that is heavier than the sleep of night, with the heat pressing down on one, or the hot wind blowing that seems to suck the moisture out of one's body. Even the children and small babies scarcely stirred or whimpered. But Nallathan, though he too lay very quietly, could not sleep. With half-closed eyes he looked up at the blue square of the sky, that looked so much bluer and brighter and deeper seen from the cloister than from the open plain. Near the well was a sacred pipal tree with a stone platform built round it, on which offerings were laid, and on the grey boughs and among the tremulous leaves a little yellow-cheeked tit hopped and called and cocked its bright black crest, and watched him with curious eyes, till it heard the call of its companions beyond the dharamshala, and darted off.

After it left the court seemed quieter than ever, so quiet that it almost frightened the child. Then it seemed to him suddenly that the pilgrims and the cloister were no longer there, that he was quite alone in a place of vast corridors and endless images, through which he walked vaguely, not knowing his way, not knowing why he was there or how he had come there. Only he could feel through it all the circle of his mother's arm, fiercely protecting. Timidly his hand sought hers, and with that touch the strange place vanished, and he woke as if from sleep, and everything was real again, and the pilgrims were waking and washing themselves and dressing their hair, and putting on clean clothes before they went to the temple. He and his mother also rose and washed and dressed, and drank some milk which Muttusami had brought, and took a little fruit. But they would not have their meal till the morning, for one must fast for Shiva Ratri. Then they went out with the other pilgrims toward the temple.

They could hear the great gongs sounding and clashing, and little shrill bells and the throbbing of great drums. Lamps were lighted in all the caddies, and people stood by them haggling, or, carefully untying a corner of their cloth, counted out a few small coins. Vendors with wooden trays went about crying their wares. It was very much like a fair, Nallathan thought, except for the number of holy men, naked or wearing the ochre cloth. Near the temple was a large tank with a high parapet of stone, and at one side a broad flight of steps led down to the water. In the centre was a little raised pavilion with stone pillars and a curved stone roof. And here also lights were burning and their reflection shivered in the water.

And now, up the street, through the thronging pilgrims, who parted to give them way, came a band of dancers, women priestesses of Muruga from some wild shrine of the hills, frenzied, possessed by their God. They wore each but a single cloth, and a twist of scarlet thread tied about their wrists. They had no other ornament and their long hair hung loose and wild. They leapt and tossed their arms and shook their wild locks and shrieked aloud in some fierce ecstasy, to the sound of small copper cymbals and hand-drums. Turning and twisting they went up to the temple gate and passed within.

The puja, the sacred ritual, had already started when Nallathan entered with his mother to make their offerings. The sacrifice to Shiva is simple, a little milk, or Ganges water, a few bael leaves, or a cake of camphor. One of his names is "He who is easily pleased".

After the offering his mother sat down by a pillar and drew out her prayer-beads, and Nallathan sat beside her wide-eyed, watching all that went on.

All the images were hung with garlands and their scent was heavy in the moveless air. The light from the innumerable lamp dazzled his tired eyes and confused him a little.

At a little distance he saw the group of wild dancers, now sitting quietly, subdued by the puja. Only one still rocked her body back and forth, back and forth, moaning softly, as if she could not be still.

The puja went on for two hours, and then began all over again. Nallathan grew very sleepy, weary of the sound of prayers murmured all around him by the worshippers. Even his mother had almost forgotten him as the prayer beads slipped monotonously through her fingers. A priest, sitting on a small mat on a little stone platform nearby, read from the Vedas in a thin droning voice that added to his drowsiness.

Suddenly he saw that one of the wild dancers, she who had moved so restlessly, had left her place and was standing beside him, gazing at him with an odd fixed stare, while a strange shudder ran down rippling through her body, again and again. It frightened him and he looked this way and that, but her eyes would not let him go. He grew more and more terrified. Somehow he must get away from that fixed gaze and that shuddering body, from the lights and the incense and the sound of prayers and the heavy scent of the garlands. He rose softly to his feet and backed away, his eyes still on her face which was smiling now, a strange, seering smile which burnt through his body. He felt himself wasting, consumed by that invisible flame. When he was some distance from her, then suddenly he wrenched himself free and fled. He ran out of the temple and through the outer court, out of the gate, into the street.

Most of the little shops were shut and everyone had gone home, or into the temple to keep the vigil. He slipped noiselessly down the silent street, through the heavy shadows, looking back furtively over his shoulders as if afraid the wild priestess might be following him. There was no one there, yet still he ran on, panting now, driven by the great fear in his heart.

Near the end of the street, on the outskirts of the town he stopped. Under a big banyan tree were a number of snake-stones, carved with the sacred Nag, the hooded cobra. There was a little shrine before which a few lamps were burning, and there was an image set in a niche of the Nagaraja himself, the Serpent King. Bending above his head, forming a sort of halo round it, was the snake-with-seven-hoods. In the wavering light of the lamps it seemed to the boy that the hoods undulated a little, and the seven tongues flickered in and out. Yet in the midst of this fear and terror was the smiling face of the Nagaraja. His figure was that of a youthful prince, gracious, lovely. Calmly and beautifully he sat there and smiled at the boy, as if to reassure him. Nallathan murmured a short prayer, and felt somewhat comforted though his lips still trembled.

He went on, but more softly now, not running as before. Beyond the circle of the lamplight he passed the limits of the little town, and stumbled along among the rough sandy hillocks bound by the great grey roots and sharp dagger-like blades of the screw-pines. It was very dark, for Shiva Ratri is moonless, the last night of the dark fortnight. But the stars were large and shining and the pale sand beneath his feet gave off a faint light, as if to guide him. He went on through an intense stillness.

He passed a small group of huts, closed and silent, and came out on a low shore where the waves splashed and hissed like a thousand serpents. Here he stood at the water's edge, bewildered, not knowing why he had come, filled with the wonder of the sea, the limitless ocean, whose bounds no man knew, which no man had ever crossed. But a sound formed itself slowly about him, or perhaps within his own mind, a mysterious voiceless summons, terrible and beautiful, which he must follow everywhere, forever, wherever it might lead. He went along the desolate shore, sure-footed among the sharp rocks, though his eyes were half closed, weighed down by some heaviness, some oppression of spirit he could not define.

Now a change came upon the night. The wind rose, and massy clouds spread before it, covering the stars. Tearing and shrieking came the Maruts, the spirits of wind and storm, leading their furious host across the sky, riding the rising waves with their great cloud-chariots, and their horses of the gale tossing their manes of foam. The night grew darker as they passed with a blackness more profound than any cloud cold bring, a darkness that was of the spirit and not of natural things. And through it walked the child, unswerving, confident, following the frail thread of that soundless voice.

Now the darkness was split by the lightning, that writhed like a fiery serpent to the earth, and again was impenetrable. Again the lightning flared, not a serpent this time, but vast and limitless, lighting the world, which yet revealed neither shore nor sea, but only the figure of the child passing through an infinite void.

Nallathan went unafraid in the midst of a great light. He no longer felt the earth beneath his feet, but only the wind that blew upon his body, tossing in his hair, and the light that held him at its heart. Still he went on, and he heard a sound like a great drum throbbing, beating in the light and the darkness, until at last its rhythm became the whirling form of a God whose dance was the world, Mahadeva, the Great God, with slim dark naked limbs entwined with serpents, in his hand a flame, on his head the crescent moon, the horns of light holding the globe of darkness. His face was rapt, his eyes half shut, their gaze turned inward, absorbed in his own rhythm. Yet seeing naught, they beheld all things. As the figure came nearer it became suddenly a woman, with wild locks floating, and in her wild dark hands a flower of darkness, the black lotus of the night. Then again it became the God, again the Goddess, sometimes it became both together, and sometimes it was two. Only the wild beating of the dance went on without cease. The boy found his own body moving, swaying this way and that, and his feet beating out that wild rhythm. And he too was dancing, dancing on the water, on the wind, caught into that beating, throbbing ecstasy. The figure came nearer. It was a woman now, who looked on him with lambent, compassionate eyes, and in one hand she held out to him the dark flower. He put up his own hand to take it. Its fragrance overwhelmed him, and he thought that for a moment she touched him with her long, delicate dark hands. Then his soul broke, and with a great cry he fell unconscious on the shore, and the waves broke round him, sighing, soothing, compassionate, relentless.

An old man, passing to his home in one of the thatched huts close by, heard the boy cry and found him lying there. He took him up in his arms for he was very light, almost without weight, and carried him to the hut, where they bathed his face, and tried to revive him with palm-toddy, from a wide-mouthed jar. But all their efforts were useless. Then they sent a lad running to the town, to the great temple, for they said: "Perhaps he is one of the pilgrims who have come here to honour the Night of the Lord."

It was a long time before the messenger came back, running, with Nallathan's mother panting beside him, her eyes wild with fear. She flung herself upon the child, calling him frantically, and as if at a summons his eyes opened slowly. They had a deep, distant look as if he had come from very far. But when his mother questioned him, he only murmured something vaguely about "the storm — the storm".

"But there is no storm, my son—the night is clear and windless."

"But the Maruts," he whispered faintly, "they came — and then —" But the recollection overcame him, and he sank again into a stupor.

They carried him back to the dharamshala where he lay for some days, while his mother watched beside him and prayed and wept. But there was no change in him either for better or worse. So finally they brought him to the ferry on a light litter of bamboos, such as are used for carrying the dead to the burning-ghats, and they crossed the water. On the other side a bullock cart waited, strewed with clean straw, and on this the child was laid and began the long journey back to Kanchi.

Day after day in the jolting cart Nallathan lay returning slowly to consciousness of the outer world. From where he lay upon the straw he could see sometimes the tops of palm trees waving above the road or sometimes a temple spire. His mother sat beside him, or walked behind the cart with Muttusami, always within sight of the boy.

Nallathan liked the cart with its thatched roof and scarlet fringe, and the great white oxen, drawing it, with painted horns and crescent shaped humps, and long swinging dewlaps, frilled like silk. He liked the big grey langurs that swung aside as they passed, and the little brown monkeys that leapt and scolded from tree to tree. He was stronger now and smiled at his mother when she fed him with rice-flake porridge; and one day he sat up and took the bowl from her hand and fed himself. Soon he was walking a little each day beside the cart, but not for very long. He grew more hungry and they stopped at the wayside stalls for hot rice pancakes, and sweetmeats of ground coconut, and soft milk-cakes, and roasted lotus seeds.

One day they came alongside a salt-cart coming up from the shore. A woman drove it, sitting in front with a child upon her knees, while the man walked beside, a garland of leaves upon his head to protect it from the sun. When they came to the next village people crowded to buy the much needed salt, carried in drum-shaped jars. Many other traders too they passed, with produce from the hills, obtained not without danger, for some of them bore the marks of arrow wounds.

Another day it was a pepper seller. He had a little donkey with long ears, which carried the bales of pepper slung across its back.

Gradually as they drew near to Kanchi and the countryside became more familiar to them, his vision receded into some fastness of his own mind, overlaid with familiar things and the sights and sounds of daily life. And his mother stopped to make offerings at all the holy places they passed, in gratitude that he had been spared to her for a season.

3

THE TEMPLES OF THE SOUTH

Time — The Present

From the most southern point of Ceylon I went to the most northern — to Jaffna and Point Pedro.

I spent a night at Elephant Pass, a narrow neck of land, scarcely more than a causeway, which connects the main island of Ceylon with the Jaffna Peninsula. The rest-house was a small Dutch fort on the shore of a great lagoon. The sturdy bastions rose straight from the water, with an overhanging balcony on the upper storey. There was no other habitation in sight; the lagoon lay in solitude fringed by tall palm trees, not the bending, languorous coconut palms, but the straighter, more robust palmyras with broad fan-shaped leaves.

After giving me my supper the staff withdrew to quarters of their own, leaving me with a hurricane lantern, and the rats, which scampered about all night across the floor and along the rafters. I tucked my mosquito curtain carefully around the mattress so that at least they might not come upon the bed, but my sleep was disturbed and uneasy, and troubled by dreams.

In the morning I rose early and watched the sun come up across the silent leaden-coloured waters. I could see no living thing but one white bird with huge, spread wings flying slowly away from me, probably some kind of crane.

We crossed Elephant Pass and stopped at a temple a little outside the town of Jaffna. My eyes were red and sore from the long journey in wind and sun, and a woman coming from the puja with flower-petals in her hand stopped and gave me some, and signed to me to put them on my eyes. "They are 'prasad'", she said. "They have been offered to the God. They are holy and will cure your eyes."

"To what God is this temple dedicated?" I asked her.

"To Kataragama".

I took the petals, grateful for her gentle kindness, and when I laid them on the inflamed lids there was indeed something soothing and healing about them, in their delicate silken touch. I prayed they might not only heal but give me some clearer vision, some more steadfast outline of my path.

As the car sped along on the level road to Jaffna we passed one of the little flat-bottomed pony-carts used in this part of the country. A man sitting cross-legged in the back waved his arms excitedly when he saw me, as if commanding me to stop — a man hollow-cheeked and sunken-eyed, with rows of curious little scars all down his body. It was the kapuwa, he of the darts, whom I had seen at the jungle festival. But we were already some distance away and I did not stop. I wondered what he wanted of me, and what he was doing there. But perhaps his home was in Jaffna.

That night a terriffic storm blew up. I was in the rest-house at Point Pedro, and I cowered in my bed while sand swirled in through the window-bars, for I could not get the shutters pulled to. The winds shook the house and I heard more than one tree fall with a crash outside. The thunder did not crash but screamed.

Toward morning I fell into a troubled sleep, but even in the dreams which came hurrying upon me I could still hear the storm. I dreamed of the Maruts, the wind-gods, and the furious hosts of the air who drive with them along the storm.

Looking down from one of those sightless steeds I saw the kapuwa, beckoning to me, his eyes gleaming and wildfire on his hair. Then the wind seemed to pull back through the window, and I was sucked into the storm which blew me here and there and out over the wild sea. I could hear the baying of phantom hounds and the screams of horses. Then suddenly I was in a core of stillness, and the host was gone; only the kapuwa came walking lightly over the waters. But before he reached me I woke on my hard bed in the rest-house. The storm was over but sand lay drifted on the floor of the room and against the door, which a servant was shaking, trying to open it to bring me my morning tea.

After breakfast I went out and walked along the shore, which was low and rocky. The landscape after the storm had a pale, quiescent look, like a nervous patient after a fit of hysteria. At one place there was a spring of fresh water gushing out among the rocks only a foot or two from the sea, like the fountain of Arethusa at Syracuse. I sat down here to watch a fisherman casting his net, which he did with great skill; gathering it all up in his hand and then throwing it, so that it opened out like a parachute above the water, then drawing it back to him again.

Suddenly I found the kapuwa standing beside me, though I had not seen him coming. He saluted me and sat down on the sand beside me in silence. I had heard that these kapuwas, except when possessed, were often quite simple, ordinary people, but it did not seem to be true of this man. He had a searching glance, which he now turned on me.

"Why has the lady come here?" he asked abruptly, speaking Hindi of which I knew a little. But I could not give him any answer.

"You should tell me that," I said, after a pause. "Can you not see many things hidden from others?"

But he shook his head. "It is dark, all dark to me." And then we sat together for a little while without speaking.

"It is very calm," I said at last, "after such a great storm."

He looked at me curiously for a moment. "Ah, yes—the storm. It was a very big storm—yes. It blew some trees down—it blew some people out of bed". I wondered fantastically for a moment if he had shared my dream, but he said nothing more about it.

"May I see the lady's hand?" I thought he wished to tell my fortune, and I held my hand out to him, but he only examined the shape of it thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said, as if coming to some conclusion, "it is a mixture of bhakti and gnana. The way will be difficult."

Bhakti and gnana—the way of devotion and the way of knowledge! I had been told the same thing once before by a Moslem seeress. But the kapuwa went on: "It will be difficult. For the bhakti will strain against the gnana, and the gnana will hold in the bhakti. There will be conflict, and much trouble. Where are you going?" he asked suddenly.

I was not very clear in my mind as to that either, but I replied, "To India—perhaps to Chidambaram."

He nodded. "Yes—Chidambaram is good. But you should go also to Rameshwaram. These places help one. Experiences are open to us in some places and not in others. It is very important to go to the right place."

"How does one find the right place?"

"One is led there, and then one knows."

Perhaps he was right, and I was led without knowing it. At any rate, I crossed over to India by the ferry at Talaimannar. As the coast of Ceylon sank from sight, the coast of India rose, with low sandy shores and villages of thatched palm leaves, and children playing in the surf. The great towers of the temple of Rameshwaram were like dense blue shadows cast on the bright sky.

The temple itself was vast, with endless corridors turning and turning as if leading to the heart of a mystery. They drew one deeper, in fold after fold of silence, till the world was remote, unreal, forgotten. I felt something change all at once, either within me or without me, as if I had crossed some spiritual barrier, into a profounder silence, into a stilled sanctity. I was near, I was very near, treading on the verge of revelation. And there before me was the central shrine, the oldest part of the temple, the most sacred. But I was not allowed to enter. They turned me back from the threshold, and rather wearily I retraced my steps. But the place was so vast, the turnings so many, that I lost myself several times. I began to feel something hostile there, in the dim flickering light and the fantastic carvings which lined the way. There seemed to be miles of them. I felt I might wander there forever, a lost soul in some underworld of fantasy. With a breath of relief I stumbled at last into the outer court, and hurried beneath the great gopuram to the silent street, where the dusk was already falling.

I found a place to sleep in one of the many pilgrim hostels. They were mostly empty for it was not a time of festival. The one I entered was a silent cloister with deep niches all around. I spread out my bedding-roll in one of them. The meal I had ordered at a food stall was brought to me ready cooked in a tiffin-carrier; I finished it quickly and lay down. The mud floor made a hard bed, but the discomfort did not keep me long awake. The moon was shining, and the leaves of a sacred pipal tree, near the well in the centre, kept trembling though I did not feel any wind. I woke once in the night, or seemed to wake, and I thought many pilgrims had come in. I could see them in the moonlight, moving about silently in the cloister or settling to rest. And I thought once a small boy was lying beside me, who felt for my hand as if in fear. But in the morning they all were gone, if indeed they had ever been there; and the cloister was silent and deserted as before.

I stopped next at Tanjore. Here there was no rest-house, but I was shown to a clean little bedroom above the small railway station, and there I left my things and went to the temple. Its great wall was thick as a fortress, and indeed it had once endured a bombardment by the French in the 18th Century. Inside the walls it was laid out on a different plan. There was one great open court, with the temple building in the centre, what looked like a nave and chancel, with a flight of steps leading up to it. All around the inner side of the wall were small shrines, one after the other, hollowed out of the wall itself.

I was told I must not enter the temple building, but might walk where I liked in the court. So I began to make a circuit of the shrines, which were all much alike, pausing here and there to observe the carvings. It was near sunset and a small band of temple musicians was going from altar to altar playing a few notes of salutation before each. There were a few other people walking about the enclosure but no one very near me, and I followed the musicians slowly as they made their round. The shrill, plaintive Tamil pipes and the throbbing of the drums were curiously stirring. When the players had finished their task they went back to the temple, while I still lingered by the shrines. They were raised above the level of the ground, almost shoulder high, and were heavily carved. Some had niches with images in them, in some the niches were empty, as if the image had been removed. Many of them were decayed and broken, some of the images defaced by the hand of time or perhaps by the hands of fanaticism; the same sacrilegious hatred that has defaced so many cathedrals in the west.

Then, as I stood there, it seemed to me that one of the images moved a little. After a first shock of surprise, when every sort of fantastic surmise raced through my mind, I looked more closely, and saw that what, in the dusk, I had taken for an image of painted wood was actually a man sitting there rigidly, cross-legged, in one of the empty niches, his gaze fixed on the blank wall opposite. He was an Indian but very fair skinned, evidently from the north. His profile was toward me, and I could see his austere, finely cut features and thin lips. He seemed lightly but strongly built, with a round bullet-shaped head and straight dark hair clipped very close. He wore the gerua, the ochre-coloured cloth of the sannyasin, the ascetic who has renounced the world, and its folds fell about him in stiff lines, like the carven robes of the Buddhas I had seen so often in Ceylon. He was so near I could have touched him, and thought he did not move nor look toward me, I felt somehow he was aware of my presence. Once for a moment, I thought he smiled a little, the very ghost of a smile, scarcely moving the thin lips, as if he found something a little amusing in the way I stood there, transfixed, gazing up at him. I hoped, a little wistfully, he might speak to me, but he did not, and I had not the courage myself to break that deep repose by any question. It is unlikely he would have answered me even if I had. I went away a little discouraged; conscious again of some "thus far and no farther"? But perhaps it was all adding up to something, and I must wait the final reckoning.

From Tanjore I went on to Chidambaram where there is one of the oldest of the southern temples. Like Rameshwaram it consists of a sequence of covered corridors surrounding the central shrine, but here the shrine is lower than the outer courts, and one can stand on the top of a long series of steps and look down the long descending vistas upon its golden roof. It is much frequented and the outermost court, by the main entrance, is lined with booths selling sacred pictures and rosaries of carved rudraksha beads, and incense and garlands and cakes of camphor. Here as usual the inmost sanctuary is forbidden to foreigners, but through the outer courts and by the many chapels, and down the long stairs and the high narrow shadowy corridors I wandered freely as at Rameshwaram, plunging again into those remote silences, seemingly so far from the outer world.

The temple is dedicated to Nateshwara, to Shiva as Lord of the Dance. It was founded by Vira Chola Raja, of a South Indian dynasty sometime in the 10th Century. He had a vision here of Shiva dancing upon the sea with Parvati, his wife. The image of the Dancing Shiva is repeated again and again, in shrine after shrine, with the serpent coiled about his arm, his body ringed with flame.

I was in one of the farthest corridors when I heard at a little distance the sound of a single flute, and turning a corner I came on a small group of people gathered before one of the lesser sanctuaries. It was dark, lit only by the small lamps burning before the image, and in the small space before the chapel some one was dancing and playing upon a transverse flute. I was startled to see his white skin, and looked at him curiously. He was English evidently, with perhaps a touch of the Celt, he was in his early twenties, and he was very handsome. His hair was thick and curling and very fair, his eyebrows slightly darker over very blue eyes. His nose had a suspicion of a tilt to it. His mouth was rather wide yet sensitive, and his chin a little stubborn.

He was such an English boy as one might expect to see in the "quads" of Oxford or Cambridge, carrying a cricket bat or a tennis racket under his arm; not dancing to a flute in a dark South Indian temple, wearing only a blue loin-cloth, and blue ear-rings of lapis lazuli. I thought at first it must be just for a "lark", and there was a changing glitter in his eyes that might be laughter or devotion. But he went on dancing very slowly and gravely, and seemingly in all seriousness. The small group watching him murmured in admiration of his fair, clear skin, his golden hair, and the beauty of his movements, for undoubtedly he danced with grace. He had a garland round his neck of jasmine and frangipani, and a few jasmine blossoms stuck in his hair; on his forehead was drawn a single vermillion line. He paid no attention to the people about him, but went on with his solemn dance, his eyes fixed on the shrine, with something of laughter in them and something of ecstasy.

I saw a woman, an Indian woman, leaning against one of the pillars, watching him. She was an elderly woman, or at least not young, but just how old it would be hard to say. There was something timeless in her face, which made one hesitate in ascribing any age to her. Her skin, which was dusky yet not very dark, was dry and rather withered-looking, yet one could not call it wrinkled.

She was tall but very slight, a little emaciated. She wore the ochre robe of the sannyasini, and her head, partly concealed by the fold of her sari, was shaven, with the hair just beginning to grow again. Her eyes were deep and dark and very quiet, and they rested on the dancing figure of the young man, not exactly with tenderness, but with a brooding watchfulness, a passiveness, a curious waiting which quietly bided its time.

At last she raised one hand, slightly, with a delicate gesture. He stopped his dance, arrested, and came to her and fell upon his knees, bowing his forehead to the earth. Then, without rising from his knees, he looked up at her and smiled. He had a very engaging smile, sensitive, sudden, spontaneous, endearing. Something of its brightness was reflected in the woman's face, for she seemed to grow suddenly younger, looking down at him with the face almost a girl, beautiful, tender, yet a little stern, and with something of sadness. He rose again quickly, and they both went away to another shrine a little farther off, where again he commenced his dance. The crowd, now become larger, followed him, and I was left alone.

I stood for a while looking at the dancing image in the shrine. Shiva, the most subtle of all the Hindu Gods, of many forms and many names: the Dancer; the Destroyer; the Ascetic; Ardhanarishwara, the Half-Woman-Lord; Kailaspati, Lord of Kailas; Vishwanath, Lord of the World. He is the dancer, self-concentrated, absorbed, rapt in the ecstasy of his own rhythm, yet he is also the Great Ascetic, sitting remote on the summit of Kailas, rapt in unending meditation; eternal movement, eternal stillness, the outward turning and the inward turning life. Some see him as purely destructive, shaking the world to pieces with the deadly whirling of his limbs, but looking at that lithe and graceful figure, so vital, so magically potent, I could not see it as the dance of death alone. The symbol here is greater than the word, more subtle, more penetrating. He is all the cycle of life and death. He is not destruction, but the principle of dissolution, which breaks down the world into its original elements, that they may again be combined, perhaps into a better one. He is power, yet the keynote of his face is always compassion, compassion beyond even the compassion of Buddha, more nearly the compassion of Christ who has descended into the world and assumed its sorrows. So he is a part of the world he continually makes and unmakes, harmonizing its conflicting elements into a new beauty of rhythm; taking upon himself the burden of man and woman, of the lower forms of life; the descent of spirit into matter, of consciousness into the inconscient—the beginning of redemption. He is rhythm revealed as form, the Word made Flesh, the eternal out-going of the Logos. Perhaps in this beauty of movement, in this visible expression of desire, he seeks to provide for us a way of escape from the sorrow and evil with which we have surrounded ourselves, a release through creation, through the achievement of beauty, through the fulness of joy, rather than the narrow way of renunciation.

As I turned away I saw coiled about the carved doorway of the shrine, bent into a circle, the great serpent, Ananta, the Endless One, the snake that surrounds the world, who holds the universe in his starry coils, on whom Vishnu rests in his vast uncreative pause. These people, I thought, as I came slowly from the temple, have developed the symbol to its highest powers. One may probe forever into its meaning without reaching finality, always asking oneself, "Is there more than this?"

The next day I went on to Madras, where I was glad of the comfort of a modern hotel after the series of rest-houses and dak bungalows. The dining-room was fairly full, of business men, tourists, travellers from East or West. I noticed one group at a table near me; an elderly man who looked like a clergyman, a middle-aged woman, and a girl and boy in their late teens or early twenties, obviously, from their resemblance to one another, brother and sister. The girl was dark-haired and very pretty, the boy not quite so dark, and also very good-looking. There was an extra place at the table, and they were evidently expecting some one.

"Has Miles not come back yet?" I heard the elderly man ask of the table in general.

"I haven't seen him, Grandfather." It was the girl who answered. "He should have been here at seven o'clock this morning."

"The trains from the south are often late."

"He said he'd only be away three days." The girl showed some resentment, her lips a little sullen.

"Where exactly was he going?"

"Down to Tanjore and some other of those places. He wanted to see the temples—or that's what he said."

"Here he is now," the middle-aged lady said suddenly looking up.

The young man I had seen in the temples came quietly to the table. He was dressed like the others in white linen, and he no longer had jasmine in his hair, or vermillion on his forehead, or ear-rings. "Sorry Sir", he said as he sat down, "Sorry Phil", to the girl. His voice was pleasant as his face, but the girl was not placated and stared down at her plate.

"We were just saying your train was probably late." The brother tried to fill in an awkward pause.

"No—it came in on time—but I had to see someone." Miles explained rather vaguely.

"How did you like the temples?"

"They were all right."

After lunch I studied the hotel register. Yes—here was the group. They had arrived a week ago from the U.K. and were on their way to New Zealand. "Reverend Arthur Wadsworth, Mrs. H. Dereham, Miss Philippa Dereham, Mr. Angus Dereham". And a little lower down, "Mr. Miles Barnes" who gave his address simply as "Delhi".

I saw them next morning with "air-lite" luggage leaving for their plane. Miles Barnes was not with them, and the girl looked as if she had been crying. But it was not my affair.

I myself went off for a day's trip to Mahabalipuram. I spent the morning wandering about those rocky clefts, carved or hollowed or cut clear from the rock. One entire cliff-face gave the story of the descent of the Ganges from heaven. The river was shown in a figure human above the waist and below a coiling serpent writhing down among the rocks. There was also by one of the "raths" a beautiful "Nandi Bull" graceful yet virile and simple in line as a Greek carving. The Nandi Bull is the "vehicle" of Shiva and usually is shown facing the entrance to his temples. But this, white and beautiful, looked more like an incarnation of the God himself.

In a small cave temple, farther back in the rocky ridges, lay a beautiful Vishnu sleeping on the Serpent of Eternity, that same Ananta, the Endless One that I had seen before at Chidambaram. Beautifully, reposefully the God slept in the vast interval between creation and creation, when life sinks back into stillness and the worlds dissolve. But in the still sleep of the dreamer lies the potential being of all the worlds to come. At last there springs from his navel a lotus, from which those worlds unfold. It is difficult to see how he differs in this sense from Shiva, but if one presses any of these great Hindu Gods far enough, they seem to coalesce in some vast Oneness, great enough to contain all man's concepts of deity.

In an unexpected dualism, at the feet of the sleeping God stand two tall demons, sinister, powerful, armed with heavy clubs. They are there waiting, ready to attack the newborn world; the assault of violence and evil, evil awake and vigilant while the God sleeps. These carvings indeed pose their own insoluble problems.

It was now very hot and I was glad to get back to the rest-house where I had my picnic lunch and an hour or two of rest. I had meant to stay the night, but my room-boy at the hotel told me firmly, "Mem sahib must come back. Not good place to stay at night." He did not say if the danger was physical or spiritual, but I thought it better to follow his advice. In certain of these places the barriers against the ghostly world are much too thin for safety.

After I had rested I packed up my bag. Just as I was leaving, the sweeper came for his backshish, a beautiful dark figure, finely modelled as a statue, with a red loincloth about his hips. I have often marvelled at the beauty one sometimes finds among the lower castes. He was like black ivory if there could be such a thing. He stood there waiting quietly with gentle, melancholy eyes and full, sensitive lips. Then, as I left, with a beautiful and simple gesture he gave me a single red flower.

That night I dreamt again the dream I had in the hostel at Rameshwaram, of a small child's body lying close to me, shrinking as in fear, a child who stirred and moaned in his sleep, and murmurred strange words of "Maruts—Maruts." And somehow, though I could not tell why, I connected it with the English boy who had danced in the temple.

4

THE SCHOLAR

Time — The Past

It was still early when Nallathan slipped out, rubbing his sleepy eyes, from the little room where he slept with his grandmother. He stole along the narrow stone terrace and peeped into his mother's room, but she was still asleep; and his baby sister in her cradle, hung from the ceiling, lay also quite still.

He went down the painted stairway to a sandstrewn courtyard where a maidservant, with a brush of twigs, was sweeping up into a heap the fallen leaves and blossoms. The first sunlight already shone on the tops of the tall, pencil-thin areca palms, and the early bees sought the first of the new day's flowers. There was a screech of opening doors and shutters, and a general setting to rights of the household. Nallathan jumped over the peacock that sat with its long tail brilliantly stretched out along the golden sand. He pulled a few golden-hearted blossoms from the champak tree in the corner, then ran to the outer gate beside which was the little household shrine. Here he knelt and offered his brief prayer and his few blossoms to Sarasvati, as was fitting for a scholar asking a divine blessing on his studies.

He waited, gnawing at a bit of green sugarcane, while the old gatekeeper, Muttusami, drew back the heavy bolts. The door was of wood, decorated with scarlet lac. Above it was carved a design of water-lilies, and on the doorposts, massive, long-tusked elephants.

He went down the dusty street, still quite empty, except for a woman here and there tracing some auspicious design before her door with coloured rice-paste. In the market the stalls were already set out with little heaps of fruit and vegetables, and a toddy-seller, putting up a fresh palm-leaf, called out the day's price for toddy.

Throwing his exhausted bit of sugarcane to a naked-looking dog, that slunk by, his coat eaten away with mange, the boy stopped at a milk-stall for a cup of fresh milk, bought one or two sweet milk-cakes, then hastened to the town gate, dodging among the elephants whose mahouts were taking them to bathe in the river. One great tusker, with red, rutting cheeks, flapped his wide ears angrily as the boy flashed by him.

Once out in the open sunlight of the country road, Nallathan walked along more leisurely by a row of great banyan trees whose roots, like thick ropes, hung loose in the air trying to reach the ground, and whose branches were the favoured roosting place of flocks of green parrots. There were thousands of them, flying off now in companies, shrilly screeching. He passed another tree by the river, bare of leaves, where the giant bats, returned from their nightly raids on nearby orchards, hung now obscenely, in their myriads, head down from the naked boughs, like some shrivelled and hideous fruit.

Beyond the river was a deserted Buddhist monastery, said to be the haunt of demons. Nallathan shivered a little as he went by, and nervously his hand sought the triple thread of the twice-born, hung from his shoulder and twisted about his waist, which signified that he lived in the threefold protection of the triple Veda.

The visions of the Night of the Lord had all but faded from his mind, his conscious mind at least, but there was a residue left somewhere very deep within him, a confused awareness of something not quite understood, of something which had happened, which might happen again. And sometimes, waking in the night, still half in a dream, he seemed to see in the shadow a delicate dark hand holding out to him a blue lotus. He was fourteen now, almost a man. Already his parents were seeking a bride for him. In another year or two very likely he would be married, and yet, though he acquiesced in whatever plans were made for him, there were times when suddenly he was quite sure they would never be carried out.

But the was care-free enough as he hastened on his way, his steps swift and light. On either side of the road stretched great fields of sugarcane, silvery in the sunlight, and rippled lightly by the wind. He turned off now on a by-path which led to the river and the little Brahmin village, about a mile from the town, where his teacher lived. He passed through a straggling coconut grove, where the shadows of the palm trees lay like great spider webs on the shining sandy soil.

The Brahmin village was clean as the courtyard of his own house. No dogs nor fowl were allowed there; only the quiet cows with their calves stood tethered to the painted house-posts, or reclined with dignity on the raised porches.

Before his teacher's door he stopped to wait for another lad who came from the woodland by the river, with a pile of faggots on his head for the morning fire. Kothaman was his particular friend, a long lank boy, with awkward limbs, and a long thin face and a long sharp chin, only redeemed from his ugliness by his eyes which were large and deep and gentle.

Nallathan helped him stack the wood in a corner of the inner courtyard. Then the two boys went together to the chief room of the house, and knelt before their master.

bowing their foreheads to the ground as they "took the dust of his feet." Then they brought their little mats of coloured straw from against the wall, unrolled them on the earthen floor, and sat down cross-legged, waiting silently while one or two other boys came in. There were about a dozen of them altogether in the little room.

The Brahmin teacher, Ashtavadanar, who sat facing them on a small platform raised a little above the level of the floor, was elderly but not aged. The forepart of his head was shaved, accentuating the high domed forehead. What was left of his long grey hair fell loosely to his shoulders. He was of middle stature, a little inclined to stoutness, but his body was supple and firm, and without flabbiness. His nose was high-bridged, his eyes dark and keen, his lips sensitive. He wore a white dhoti, and a white shoulder-cloth, edged with a narrow band of gold. The upper part of his body was bare, except for the triple thread. He sat with closed eyes, his head slightly bent, and his lips moved slightly, as he murmured to himself the sacred shlokas, waiting for his pupils to assemble. Only Kothaman, the boy who had brought the faggots, lived with his master in the manner prescribed by the shastras. The others, like Nallathan, came day by day.

At last Ashtavadanar opened his eyes and joined his hands in salutation, the fingertips lightly touching, bending his head with a gesture of reverence to the words he was about to speak. The boys' voices followed him as he intoned slowly the sacred formula:

"From the unreal lead us to the real,
From darkness lead us unto light,
From the mortal lead us to immortality."

Over the doorway, leading to the courtyard, hung a fine curtain of beads, and the shadows rippled across it as it swayed in the hot breeze. There was but a single window in the room, and from it nothing could be seen but a patch of blue sky, and the red-flowered branch of a coral tree.

Verse by verse the scholars repeated after their master the lesson for the day, until all knew it by heart.

> *"Students of Brahman, it is this we discuss among ourselves : What is the cause? Is it Brahman? Whence are we born? Wherefore do we live? Where is our final rest?*
>
> *"God, who is one only, is hidden in all beings. He is all-pervading and is the inner self of all creatures. He presides over all actions. He is the Witness. He is pure Consciousness, free from all modes.*
>
> *"Those wise men, who ever feel in their own hearts the presence of him, the Eternal among the eternals, the Intelligent among all intelligence —to them belongs eternal happiness and to none else.*
>
> *"These truths when taught shine forth only in the high soul who has supreme devotion to the God and to his teacher. They shine in the high soul alone.*
>
> *Shantih, Shantih, Peace. Peace."*

There was a moment's silence, and Ashtavadanar then began his discourse: "Oh, my sons, in accepting you as my pupils, did I not promise to each one of you, that your heart should dwell in my heart, that my mind you should follow with your mind, that in my words you might rejoice with all your heart? Thus would I make known to you the holy scriptures, that you may not follow them merely with your lips, but that your soul may lie open to them. Thus shall you begin to tread the path to that goal to which you were born. For the birth of a Brahmin is an eternal incarnation of the sacred law, for he is born to fulfil that law and to be one with Brahman.

"Giving no pain to any creature, let him slowly build up spiritual knowledge that he may acquire a companion for the life that is to come. For in that life neither father nor mother nor wife nor sons nor kinsmen stay to be with him. But only that spiritual knowledge alone remains with him; that alone shall support him and abide with him.

"Single is each being born, single it dies. Single it enjoys the reward of its virtues, single it suffers the punishment of its sins.

"The body is cleansed by water, the heart is purified by truthfulness, the soul by sacred learning, the mind by true knowledge."

"Truly my sons, the gift of divine compassion is one that must be sought. But higher even than sharing another's sorrow, is the gift of sharing another's joy. For sorrow is temporal, it shall die, but the joy we share is immortal and shall live forever. Thus it is with the words I learned from my master. As one who has received must give in his turn, so to you now I offer it. May the blessed God make you able to receive it."

Again he blessed them, then added cheerfully:

"Go now my sons and take your food. Let each worship that which shall become the tissue of his body, not receiving it with contempt, but as a holy thing."

One by one the boys again knelt, and left the room. Only Kothaman remained behind, for he had been unable to repeat his lesson, and could not eat until he had mastered his task. The others dashed, with the relief of movement, across to the kitchen on the other side of the court where Tilakavati, a comely, middle-aged woman, with the help of a little maidservant, prepared their food.

Each received from her, on a plate of plantain leaves, rice cooked with slices of citron and flavoured with herbs, and a bowl of pulse, and mango pickles, and large white squares of pumpkin fried in ghi, and afterwards a bowl of curds. They sat in the shade beneath a thatch of palm-leaves stretched out from the wall on bamboo poles. When they had finished, they dozed or talked together in lowered voices, giggling a little over a neighbour, a pupil of another teacher, who it was said had broken the vow of Brahmachari, the strict chastity demanded of a student of the Vedas. They whispered of the various penances, which according to the orthodox rules of the shastras, he must perform.

"He must sacrifice a one-eyed ass," the eldest of the boys declared, "at midnight, at the crossroad, and then he must wear its skin for a year as his only garment. He must proclaim his deed to everyone he meets, and he must never eat more than one meal a day, and after a year he will be purified, and allowed to go back to his studies."

"That's what the shastras say," another lad exclaimed scornfully, "but if he is wealthy, and his parents give money to the priests, he will be purified by a single sacrifice and go back to his school when he likes."

When they had rested they returned again to their lessons, reciting the rules of grammar and logic, of rhetoric and astronomy and numbers, all that made up the orthodox learning of the day.

It was not until dusk, "the hour of cow-dust" when the cattle are driven home to the villages and the dust raised by their feet lies like a cloud in the air, that the boys left for their homes. Only Nallathan lingered a little to talk with Kothaman.

"They are going to marry me next year," he said.

"Perhaps," Kothaman answered doubtfully. "Yet I don't believe a married life is for you any more than for me."

"You will be a sannyasin, you have always said so."

"That must be as the Lord wills. Perhaps I'm too stupid to be anything else. When I try to learn my lessons my head turns round and round, but when I sit and think of the Lord, everything becomes clear again."

The lads strolled along toward the river and sat down on the bank, beneath a large sal tree.

"It is a good thing" Kothaman sighed, "that one need not be clever to be a sannyasin. One needs only devotion."

"It would be very lonely, with no home, with no one at all."

"Single we are born," Kothaman quoted simply, "single we die. What is the difference?"

"We may be friends for all that. But I don't know what I shall be."

"You are so clever, Nallathan. You can be anything you like. Perhaps you will be one of the King's ministers, like your father."

"I'm not sure I should like that. I don't know at all what I should like. Only sometimes—I think I remember something—only I don't know what it is. But it's something quite different—different from anything else."

"There was a mark on your forehead when you were born. I have heard many people say so."

"Well," remarked Nallathan, rubbing his forehead a little ruefully, "it's not there now. At least, I don't feel anything."

"Perhaps it's something not everyone can see."

"If I can't see it and can't feel it, and no one knows what it means anyway, it can't matter very much."

Softly Kothaman laid his hand on Nallathan's forehead. "I almost think I can feel something. Perhaps it means you are chosen of the Lord. It is you who will go out from your home, and I will follow you. I will follow wherever you go."

Nallathan shrank back from Kothaman's touch "No—no—I shall never do that. I'd be too much afraid. Those ways are dark and terrible—more terrible than anyone knows."

"You won't be afraid. When the time comes you won't be afraid."

"It's time to go home now." And Nallathan sprang to his feet. "It is almost dark and they will be shutting the gates."

He ran off along the river road, which led back to the town by another way, passing the old Kailasanath temple where the gongs were sounding for the evening puja. As it was late he did not go in, but stood for a moment before the door, his hands clasped above his head, and prayed silently to Shiva, Lord of Kailas, the sacred mountain far in the remote north, where he, the Lord, sits alone in meditation, beyond the dream of the world.

When he reached home it was quite dark, and lamps were burning in the kitchen and in his mother's room. He went up to her, and stood submissively while he was scolded for being late. Then he took his baby sister from her cradle and carried her up and down the room, singing to her, while she tugged at his hair, and tried to put her fingers in his eyes, attracted by their brightness as he stood in the light of the lamp. The lamp-stand was of bronze cast in the form of a woman, with outstretched hand, and in the hollow of the palm was a little bowl of oil with the wick floating in it. It had fascinated Nallathan when he was a child, and now he showed it to his sister, who wanted to pull the bronze hair of the statue, as she had pulled Nallathan's.

Now he heard Muttusami locking the big house-gates, and from the kitchen his grandmother called out to him that his supper was ready. So he put his sister back in her cradle, and went down to his supper with a lordly air, sitting alone to be served by the women, as became the man of the house. For his father, as was usually the case, was absent at the King's court.

Kothaman, left alone beneath the sal tree, sat there in silence for a long time, his hands quietly folded, his eyes fixed on the sky, while the pale stars were lighted, one by one, in the house of night.

Then with a strange peace upon his face he returned to the teacher's house, to wait upon him in whatever service he might require. Finally he fell asleep, his mat stretched upon the hard ground before his master's door.

5

THE GATES OF GOD

Time — Legendary

The increasing sunlight caught the palace in a golden net. The sound's and busyness of the morning grew fainter as one by one the inmates ceased from their many tasks and took their rest.

Gazing from her gilded lattice the Princess Sati looked down with brooding eyes upon a little garden court below her window, sun-dried and golden in the haze of noonday. In the centre a tank of red porphyry held glistening water on which blue and scarlet lotus lay like jewels. A peacock cried and drew its trailing feathers across the stone rail, and stepped delicately down and cried again, longing for rain. In the stillness a faint tapping could be heard from another part of the palace. At the sound the Princess frowned a little and her gaze sought, beyond the little garden, beyond the long wall of the palace and the still tree-tops, the far outline of the hills, the sacred hills from which the holy river, the Ganga, came rushing, flowing through the Gates of God.

Then with a sigh she turned back to the room where her handmaids sat upon silken cushions or fine-woven mats of sweet grass; their long tresses heavy with the heat; their thin garments clinging to their slender bodies; their eyes darkened with kohl against the glare of the sun which penetrated even within that shuttered stillness; their reddened lips pouting and sulky with sleep.

Some altercation on the subject of the river had arisen among them, and one girl, darker than the rest, was now maintaining her point with quivering lips.

"The river flowed first in heaven and its spirit is still there. Can you not see it on any starry night flowing from end to end of the sky! But in mercy it descended to earth that we might have part in the blessing of its waters. Mahadeva caught it in his hair that it might not come down too quickly and drown everything. It wandered in his hair for a thousand ages, and then he unfastened a single lock and by that it descended."

"I don't believe it," murmured one of the other girls, yawning. "As if anybody could hold a river in his hair." She was fairer-skinned than the other, and taller, with a heavily made-up face and many jewels.

"But it wasn't just anybody," the dark girl protested. "It was the Lord Shiva—it was Mahadeva."

"Well, it's all silly anyway. Isn't it?" and she appealed to the Princess, who looked up sombrely and eyed her maidens with some distaste. "Perhaps," she replied slowly, "it is a story we do not quite understand. Sometimes a thing has many meanings, and we, who are foolish, see only the outward meaning, while others, more wise, see the inwardness which is hid from every one else."

"I don't see the use of a story I can't understand," the fair girl persisted. "If the meaning is hidden, how am I to blame if I don't see it?"

"But Mahadeva—" began the dark girl. But Sati held up her hand. "You know my father has forbidden him to be worshipped here, or even his name to be mentioned in the palace. Let us speak of something else. Or let Kamala sing for us."

Kamala, the singer, full-bosomed, a little stout, with something of melancholy in her eyes and in her voice, placed her vina before her and plucked the strings for a moment or two, then began to sing:

"Holy Ganga, Mother Ganga,
We pray to thy unceasing waters;
In thy merciful waters,
In the flow of thy waters,
Cleanse me of sin,
Let my sins be borne away.

"Eternal as the snows
Whence thou comest,
Eternal as the ocean,
To which thou goest,
So are thy waters,
Thy unresting waters,
Never failing,
Our redemption forever.

"Holy Ganga, Mother Ganga,
Bear me at last on thy waters,
Bear me on thy merciful waters,
Bear me to the endless ocean,
To the unknown depth
Where all life is one."

At the end of her song Kamala rested her arms on her vina, and was silent, her eyelids drooping. The other girls dozed upon their cushions long before the song was ended, and very soon Kamala slept too.

The silence lay deep upon the palace save for the faint tapping which had made the Princess frown, and now even this diminished and was lost in the silence, as the workmen also left their work and rested in the noonday heat. They were erecting the lists and pavilions for the thousand guests expected to take part in the contest for the Princess's hand. Here the princes who were her suitors would display their valour, their skill with lance and bow, and here before the assembled company Sati would choose her bridegroom from among them, and with her own hand place the garland upon his shoulders. Their task was nearly done. In a few days the company would gather, and Sati frowned more darkly as she thought of it. She turned restlessly on her cushions, and at last she rose, softly, that she might not disturb her companions.

She looked tall as she stood among the sleeping girls, her figure slender yet strong and firmly made, its contours visible through the single diaphanous garment falling in thin folds to her ankles from a jewelled girdle. A scarf of the same transparent material was cast loosely about her shoulders, but partly concealing her young breasts. Her eyes were large, and deep and bright as the pool of clear water in the sunlit court; but a shadow lay across them like a veil. Her rich lips had a drooping sadness, that was not quite melancholy but rather a quiet restraint. All her being seemed full of a power and energy which she but half realized, and half-unconsciously repressed.

She moved softly yet without stealth away from the sleepers, passing the slender scarlet pillars of her chamber with their gilded capitals, down a stairway carved with lotus buds to the little court below. This she passed, stopping a moment at the shining pool to pull out one or two half-opened flowers, whose petals she thrust apart with her fingers, curling them backward.

Then she went on in her slow grace through a large colonnaded courtyard. In the far corner she pushed open a half-closed door and entered a small chapel, still and dark save for one bright patch of sunlight on the floor from a single window high under the eaves. She knelt before the imageless altar and offered her flowers, whispering her prayer softly, her eyes anxious and earnest.

"Salutatian to Him,
The great-souled one,
Who has no name nor form,
He who resides in all,
Who is Lord of all,
The Self of all beings."

She flung a few sandal-chips on a brazier of hot coals, and their thin flame rose up, sweet scented, as she continued her prayer:

"O Fire, O holiest Agni
Invoke for me the Goddess of Beauty,
Fair of hue, wreathed in gold.
Invoke for me the Goddess of Fortune
Who will not leave me
The Goddess of Fortune abiding in the lotus,
Of lotus-hue, who is the heart's desire.
The fulfilment of prayer,
Who shines in the world
The Bestower of Good,
May she be one with me.
Shantih — Shantih — Shantih."

The soft voice ceased and the scent of incense died away in the still air as the thread of smoke dissolved and sank back to the dying coals. Then sighing Sati rose and left the shrine. She did not return to her maidens, but went on through the sleeping palace to another long courtyard that faced the outer wall. Here she climbed a narrow flight of stone steps to a small watch-tower, with narrow slit-windows that looked out beyond the palace precincts. The tower was not high, only a few feet above the wall itself, and she could see the scene before her quite minutely.

Below the wall flowed the great river, its current strong and steady even now in the dry season, though on the farther side of its bed were shoals and sandbanks which would later be hidden by the floods. A dusty path ran along the bank, between the wall and the river, and a little beyond the palace it opened into a wide square from which a broad flight of steps ran down to the water. Here women had been washing their linen which now was spread, many-coloured, on the steps to dry. A man with two large gourds slung under his arms was swimming across from the sandbanks, upheld by the buoyant gourds, and nearer to her, at the edge of the path, stood a great white bull, the long silken folds of its dewlap swinging from its vast chest, its hump strong and curved, its horns painted scarlet and tipped with gold. The great animal stood beautiful and still as carved stone, motionless above the water.

The Princess leaned against the wall, her eyes close to the window-slit, and looked down upon the river, her eyes following its course upwards to the two hills, standing like portals, through which the river issued, Hari-Dwar, the Gates of God.

She stood listening, her eyes closed, as she became absorbed in the steady, ceaseless sound of the flowing water. She could hear it beneath all the other sounds of life, a steadfast, immutable dominant. It drowned the sound of the tapping hammers which had again begun, of the voices and laughter of the washerwomen, talking together as they rested, the voice of a hawker passing along the bank. All the sounds were lost in it that she had ever heard, the murmur of her own heart was lost in it. She felt as if it flowed right through her heart, through her mind, her consciousness, bearing her deep and far, dissolving her soul. She struggled as if to force herself against that devastating current, to maintain her integrity, her being, against its flow, its downward, onward urge, to struggle back, back, to the source, to the snow-bright mountains whence it came.

How long she stood, leaning on the wall, self-conscious, she did not know. But suddenly with a little moan she came to herself as if released, and sank to her knees on the stone floor, resting her head upon her arm. It was then she heard some one singing, outside, a man's voice, raptly singing :

"O Shiva, white is thy body covered with ashes,
White is Kailas on which thou dwellest,
Kailas the holy, shining in the beauty of its snows.
O Shiva, white is the bull on which thou ridest,
White are thy matted locks,
Flecked with the foam of Ganga. .
O blue-throated one, O moon-crested,
White shines the moon on thy forehead
Thy wrists are twined with serpents.
Lord of the Mountain
To thee I bow down."

She rose softly, pressing her eyes again to the window that she might see the singer. The river-steps were deserted. The washerwomen had rolled up their linen and departed. The swimmer was no longer in sight. The white bull was gone, but there at the water's edge, where it had stood so white and still, a man was standing, naked save for the ashes which smeared his body to an unnatural whiteness, and a single gerua cloth about his loins. His long hair was gathered into a knot on top of his head, and he wore a necklace of cowrie shells knotted with scarlet thread. He had a long trident in his hand on which he leaned as on a staff, and he stood there, stilly, and raised his voice again loftily in his song:

> *"O Lord Shiva, thou Compassionate One,*
> *O Wielder of the trident,*
> *Whose head is the heaven,*
> *Whose body is the world,*
> *The Self of all beings,*
> *To the Half-Woman-Lord,*
> *Half of whose body is Durga,*
> *Thou Shining One,*
> *O Giver of joy,*
> *To thee I bow down."*

As she listened her face was troubled, for she knew the man to be one of those wandering, ascetics, the worshippers of Shiva, Mahadev, whose worship had been forbidden by her father, the follower of another tradition. The palace was open to all others, but the devotees of Shiva were not permitted to enter. They were known by their ash-smeared bodies, by the necklace of cowrie-shells, by the trident. Perhaps it was some fascination of the forbidden thing which caused the Princess to look down on him with so absorbed an interest, perhaps some half-conscious recognition.

Suddenly he turned, looking toward the tower where she stood. She knew he could not see her through the narrow slit, yet instinctively she shrank back. A moment later she heard his voice again, now right below the tower.

> *"To Him I bow down,*
> *The Merciful,*
> *He who is reached by prayer,*
> *The End of Desire,*
> *To Him I bow down."*

She was powerless now, her gaze drawn again to the window, magnetized. She could see him looking up at her, she could see his eyes, deep and clear and compelling, and close, oh, very close. Her heart was racked with a sudden anguish of longing, and she pressed her pale fingers against the window, as if to force a way out.

Then, as suddenly, she turned and fled, overcome by a wild panic, she fled back to her chamber and her sleeping handmaids, and flung herself down among her cushions, so that no one knew she had ever left there.

Only when the night was come, and her maids spread the tufted quilts on her bed of sandalwood and ivory, she lay very still but wakeful, lapped in a dim trance of wonder and desire, a touch of some far off fulfilment.

6

THE NAGA KING

Time — The Present

The lady-manager of the hotel at Aurangabad came to me and said, "There is a young man here, an Englishman, who wants to go to Ajanta tomorrow. Would you mind if he went in the car with you?" As I hesitated a moment she added apologetically, "It's the only car we have, and as you have engaged it, there is no other way for him to get there."

We set off at six o'clock the next morning. I was not very much surprised to find the young man was Miles Barnes. There are some paths which cross and cross again, surely, yet for no apparent reason; bound perhaps by the link of other lives in the past, unknown to the conscious mind, yet felt subtly by the emotions; travellers who meet for a time on a long journey and part again, following some secret sign, on other paths to other fulfilments; faces half recognised, hearts once loving, the appointed guide rejected and sought again.

I mentioned that I had seen him at Madras.

"Yes," he said, "I went there to meet my fiancee. At least," he added, flushing quickly, "she was my fiancée, but it's all off."

And further than this he was not communicative. But later as the long drive was tedious, we fell again to talking. He had, it appears, been living in Delhi for two or three years, with some job or other at his embassy. He was on leave now, and had been undecided whether to go south, or north to the hills. But it was cold weather now in the hills, he would go there another time. (Undoubtedly, he would). He had wanted very much, he said, to see the great temples of the south.

"Yes," I murmured, "I saw you in the temple at Chidambaram."

At this he coloured again. His skin was very fair and flushed easily. He was a bit confused, as if uncertain whether to be offended and on his dignity. But he broke out in a moment. "Did you see the woman, the woman I was with?"

"Wearing the gerua? Yes, I saw her. I thought she was probably your guru."

"I met her at Trichy, and she took me to the other temples, at Tanjore and Madura and Kanchi — all of them. Then she disappeared, just went off and left me. I want very much to find her again. I don't even know her name."

"She will find you," I said, "when she wants you."

"Do you think — ?" he began, and then fell silent without completing his question.

A little later he said suddenly, "She asked me one day 'Is it light you are seeking, or darkness?' But I didn't know what she meant."

"Perhaps," said I, thinking it over, "there is a light so great that it is darkness to our eyes; then it is darkness we should seek."

But he shook his head, unsatisfied. And indeed I was not very well satisfied myself, and I remembered that mysterious promise made of old to the prophet: "I will give thee the treasures of darkness."

He did not speak again until we reached Ajanta. We left our bags at the guest-house, where we were spending the night, and went on to the caves. He was a very pleasant companion, lively and good humoured; yet in spite of this surface gaiety, I could see at times a haunted look about the face, something inscrutable in the blue eyes, that made him, altogether, rather puzzling. He was keenly interested in everything he saw, curious, but not very well informed.

He kept asking me, What did this mean? What did that mean? Which I sometimes could answer and sometimes could not.

He questioned me particularly about the lotus which appeared everywhere in carvings and paintings. I explained its threefold life, how it was rooted in the earth, in the material world, and grew up through the waters, which symbolised the psychic or mental world, and its blossom opened in the upper air, the world of the spirit.

He was much excited by one group in the first cave, a band of girl musicians with flutes and long barrel-like drums, surrounding a dancer. Back of them to the right was another girl, another dancer perhaps, resting, leaning against a pillar, her chin resting on her hand, her face very meditative and absorbed, but whether it was the music she was so intent upon, or some thought in her own mind, one could not tell. There was something in her face both stern and sad, yet her lips were tender, her nostrils finely shaped, her figure light and delicate, in contrast to the musicians who were more heavily built.

He was interested too in the frescoes of the Naga Loka, that place of beauty and mystery deep in the earth, where the serpents have their home, whence they issue, gliding from some hole or crevice, as water wells up mysteriously in springs from the nether darkness. For the snake-spirits and the water-spirits have a most ancient affinity.

Here, among the frescoes illustrating the Jataka tales, was shown the Nagaraja himself in his splendour, the Serpent King, entertaining the King of Banaras, Ugrasena, who had saved his life once when he had been caught in his serpent form, by a snake-charmer, and brought to the palace at Banares. In gratitude the Naga King had shown Ugrasena the way to the Naga Loka, and now he displayed before his guest all the wonders of his realm. In one painting he has taken the form of a giant cobra, and Ugrasena, half in fear, half in wonder, watches his swaying dance. In another he has resumed his man's shape and is seated on his couch, a gracious and beautiful figure, his identity betrayed only by the seven-headed cobra spreading its seven hoods above him.

In another it shows Ugrasena returning to Banares, laden with precious gifts; a symbol perhaps of the powers of earth who are generous to those who are not at enmity with them, who do not trample on them nor despise them nor abhor them. For the beauty and the riches of the earth are theirs in abundance, to give as they will.

There are other stories, besides that of the King of Banares, of those who have penetrated to the snake-realm, sometimes of the marriage between a mortal and a snake-princess, but in all the tales this underworld is not a place of gloom, of shades, like the Greek Hades, but of beauty and wonder, where the sun shines without harm and the moon without evil. That paradise which others have depicted on the hill-tops, or even in the heavens, is here shown as the very heart of the earth.

I was reminded of the question the Indian woman had asked Miles, for here was the Kingdom of Darkness, the Kingdom of the Serpent, and behold it was Light.

We visited the other caves, one by one, and returned along the rocky ledge, which is the only access to them. Miles went in again to the first cave, "to have another look at that dancer," but I noticed it was not the dancer his eyes sought, but that other girl, still and sad, at the back of the picture. He seemed puzzled as if groping for some lost remembrance, some link far in the past of another age, some purpose of great urgency, a search unfulfilled, a relation broken off, denied.

Afterwards he was confused and restless. He paced restlessly up and down the veranda of the bungalow, his fair brows thickly knit in a frowning perplexity. At last he asked if I would mind if he took the car back to Aurangabad that night, and sent it for me again in the morning. So he went off and I sitting alone on the veranda of the guest-house in the clear and tranquil dusk, wondered about him very much. He was going he said to Rajasthan and it seemed probable we would meet again in Udaipur. But I was going first to Bombay.

The Bombay train ran through bare desert country, and rocky desolate hills, sliced off at the top like the mesas of New Mexico. But the desert can be strangely attractive, and I sat close to the window, absorbed in this arid landscape.

In Bombay I hired one day a small boat at the quay to go to the island of Elephanta. We chugged slowly across a wide stretch of water and landed at a small jetty from which a pathway of planks led up a half-mile or so between the long-rooted mangroves to solid ground and the cave temple. It was not the hour for the little steamer which brings the tourists, and there was not a soul to be seen except one old sadhu grey-haired, wearing the ochre cloth, sitting on a rocky ledge in the forecourt.

The temple was never completed and its very roughness added something to its impressiveness; the carved figures looming up out of the solid rock as if by enchantment. I crossed the forecourt and entered the main hall, low and dark, with round squat pillars. To the right was a shrine standing foursquare and free, with four doorways flanked by all guardians armed and strangely gracious. They looked like young warrior angels, or perhaps knights of the Grael, without fear and without reproach.

On one side of the cave-wall was a relief of the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, on the other was the Half-Woman-Lord, Shiva uniting in a single form the natures of man and woman. But the central image, the great Trimurti, overwhelms all others, the most powerful, the mightiest image I have ever seen. The cave was deep and full of shadow, and out of the darkness, as it seemed out of the earth itself, emerged vast and enigmatic, detached, bodiless, the threefold face of God. On one side is Brahma the Creator, holding the lotus, gentle, benign, wondering at the beauty in his hand; on the other Shiva as Destroyer, an image of terror and of rage, holding the hooded serpent, confronting it, his lips opened as in a shout of amazement or triumph; all the beauty of life, all its terror, and between them, vast, smiling unanswerable, the face of inscrutable mystery; beyond creation and destruction, beyond the beauty and the terror, Vishnu who sustains them all.

And these three are One God.

Here was the world's enigma, plain to the eye, perhaps the solution was there too, yet I could not read it. It was like poring over some text in an unknown tongue. One may respond to its dignity and beauty, speculate as to its significance, but its meaning is not to be forced from it.

Before I left Bombay I saw in the window of a small curio shop a bronze figure of the Ardhanarishwara, the Half-Woman-Lord. It was in the dancing pose which is unusual, for this form is usually shown standing straightly, the two natures joined in their repose; but here they were joined in movement, welded into one by the harmony of the dance. The figure was four-armed, holding the hand-drum and axe of Shiva, and the lotus of Parvati. It combined grace and strength, and had a force of movement which was strangely exciting, and at the same time very reassuring. It was slightly damaged, one or two fingers had been broken, and the price marked was not very high. I went into the shop and bought it from a bored young man, to whom selling a God was evidently no more than selling any other lump of bronze of the same weight. It was very heavy, and weighed down my luggage more than the porters at the railway stations seemed to think desirable; but I felt curiously protected, as if I had placed myself in the hands, not of the image, but of that of which the image was the symbol.

When I reached Udaipur I found Miles already there in the little hotel, perched on a ridge between two lakes, very white and shining, with a pink oleander at one corner. It had a flat roof with a flight of stairs going up outside, from where one could watch the skies and see the great cranes flying over at sunset to the farther lake, desolate and dark. On the nearer lake was the palace, a vast medieval structure with the great wall of the Zenana rising up, windowless, from the water's edge. The Maharaja still lived there, and the Maharani kept up her ancient state, with a band of girl-musicians to play to her in the morning when she got up, and while she was being dressed, a lengthy and intricate ritual.

The Raja's family are descendants of the sun; and we drove one day to their ancestral temple, far in the desert. There were a number of small domed buildings, rather cramped together, surrounding the main temple, a low, heavy-looking structure with a small porch and an inner hall. We could not enter, but a slit had been made in the wall through which one could look into the shrine itself and watch all the ritual. The priests wore long red coats with a golden fringe, right to their feet, and pointed caps of cloth-of-gold. I have never seen such a dress elsewhere in India, and could find out nothing as to its origin. The ceremony itself was the usual one, the offering of flowers and milk and incense, and the washing of the lingam, the symbol of Shiva.

On another day we went to another, more ancient palace, now in ruins, on the shores of another lake, with pavilions jutting out into the water on massive buttresses of rough stone. Here I lost track of Miles, and when I found him again he was leaning breathlessly against a broken stone-lattice, his face very white.

"There was some one there," he whispered, "a girl — she was dancing, and then she was gone."

It was perhaps some trick of light, some slipping shadow on the wall; but I could not be sure. Perhaps it was we who were the shadows from some life far in the past, richer and more beautiful.

I saw Miles once or twice in Delhi, and we went together to Agra, and to Fatehpur Sikri, and there we sat together in the deserted court of Jodhbai's palace of rose-red stone, while the pale green blossom-headed parroquets flew in and out of the deserted arches with high, shrill cries, and the ring-doves moaned unseen. He was despondent because he could not find the woman of the temples, and only half believed me when I assured him she would come to him again. It was to me quite inevitable, but he could not understand. And the plaint of the doves in the desolate palace was like the voice of his despair. "It is past — it is gone — it is ended."

He told me at intervals more about himself. He had, it appeared, an Irish mother, and though she had died when he was a small child, she had left him, I imagine, a certain heritage, a responsiveness, a sensitiveness, his gay, quick winning smile, and the light in his blue eyes, that came and went according to his mood. Perhaps she had left him too that darker inheritance, the sudden moodiness such as I had witnessed at Ajanta, which fell upon him unawares and possessed him utterly, when the light in his face was blown out like a candle, and he was left in a brooding darkness, sullen, restless, resentful, as if he sought an answer to a question he could not form, or a path he could not see, leading he knew not where.

His friends, the Derings, had I found, lived next door, and I think he had drifted into an engagement with the girl, when there was no very real link between them. In any case, he took the breaking of their engagement very lightly. "She will find someone else," he said easily. "It's better for her too." She had been, evidently, quite effaced by the coming of the woman of the temple, whose disappearance so completely preoccupied him.

But back in Delhi not very long afterwards he came to me in great excitement. "I have seen her — I am sure of it. I was just walking along the street, and suddenly I looked up and she was right beside me. I lost her again in the crowd, but I am sure she is here."

And he went off again, still much elated. My heart went with him, for I thought perhaps I knew more of what it meant than he did. The search for the "guru" is regarded in India as the beginning of the spiritual life. When one is ready, he will come. The guru, the appointed guide, is but one. One may find him or not, in this life or in that, but he — or she — alone can lead one finally to salvation, to that divine life which is our end. Having found him, one may reject him, and then the search must begin again — in some other life perhaps, for the road is long.

It must, I thought, be some such link that bound Miles to this unknown woman; but I still wondered why he had danced in the temples, and what significance it had for him. And what relation, if any, it had to his broken engagement. Might it not sometimes be that the guide and the beloved are one, leaving no place for any other tie. I remembered Dante's "dolce guida e cara" — sweet guide and dear.

A week or so later I 'phoned to him at the embassy, but they told me he had left his job and gone away, they did not know where.

7

THE LAME WEARER OF GARLANDS

Time — The Past

The wedding ceremony, so it seemed to Nallathan, had been going on forever. It began in the early morning with the bidding of the guests, while the women were busy cleaning the house and decorating the pandal, or bridal canopy stretched out on four poles, with garlands and fresh mango leaves. Now it was growing dusk but still the endless ritual went on, the invocation of the Gods, of the ancestors, of the nine planets, of the eight divine guardians of the eight quarters of the world; the offerings of fire, of milk, of ghi, of cooked and uncooked rice; followed by the gifts, the gift of the bride, of cows, of land, of the salagram or sacred stone. Gifts of cloth and sandalwood and betel had been given to all the Brahmins, both men and women, who had come.

Once, hovering at the door, Nallathan thought for a moment he had seen Kothaman in his sannyasin's cloth of gerua, but he did not come in. They had turned, after all, to their different ways. Nallathan to the household life, Kothaman to the way of the wanderer.

Now the lamps were lit around the pandal where he sat with his bride, a rather plain little girl of seven or eight, who whimpered and giggled by turns. Nallathan himself preserved an impassive dignity, but he was tired and hungry and growing very ill-tempered. He had tied the tali around his wife's neck, he had asked forgiveness for his sins, he had sacrificed to the household deity. There had been a great din of clashing gongs and cymbals.

Now all the guests were seated at the feast and only after they had finished would food be given to the groom and his bride, food specially prepared for them. At last a large banana leaf was set on the ground before them, and four lamps placed at the four corners. Then women came bearing the first dishes.

And then suddenly the pandal was gone, and the house and all the people. In a great silence he was alone walking by the shore of a moveless sea. And in the stillness there was a voice that called him without sound, a call ineluctable, imperative, a call which must be followed everywhere, forever, at all costs, without delay, without question. The call he had heard long ago, on the Night of the Lord, and followed it to his undoing. It had come again, the unseen light, the mystic summons, that came for him alone, singling him out, cutting him off at a stroke from all around him. Without a word, without a sound, without a backward glance, his eyes half closed, his face stilled in ecstasy, one hand stretched out slightly as if led by an invisible guide, softly, unhesitant, he rose and followed.

To the astonished guests, who saw him go, it was only a moment till he had passed out through the open door, and was gone, lost in the night.

Then there was a flurry, at first of amusement, then of consternation, then of outrage. The parents of the bride, Nallathan's own parents, the priests, the witnesses, all rushed out after him, while the assembly broke up in confusion, and the bride was removed from the pandal by her indignant relatives. For Nallathan could nowhere be found. He might have become a part of the night, for all trace he had left. Some, who had seen his face, said he had followed a divine call, others, chiefly the bride's relatives, that he had been carried off by demons, even that he was a demon himself and had been revealed in his true nature by the force of the holy ceremony. In any case, he was gone. He was gone, and he never returned.

Nallathan, after a very long time or perhaps after no time at all, found himself walking in the grey dawn in a countryside he did not know. He could hear far off the slow rolling of the sea on a level shore.

He was very hungry and as the sun rose he stopped at a small farmstead to ask for milk. The woman stared at him with such astonishment that the boy looked down at himself, and then in some confusion hurried away. He realized he was still dressed as a bridegroom, with a jewelled girdle and heavy necklace and garlands, and golden ear-rings and anklets and armclasps.

There was a patch of woodland not far off and he hastened to it and hid himself among the trees. Then he dug a hole with his hands and stuffed all his jewels into it and covered them with leaves. He trampled on the garlands, and look off his loincloth, threaded with gold and turned it inside out and rubbed it in the dirt, so that it did not look so new or so fine. He kept only a small silver moon, a delicate crescent with which he pinned his hair in a knot on the top of his head. After a moment's hesitation he also slipped off the sacred thread, and concealed it among the leaves. Then, wearing only the dirty cloth he went on to the next village where at last he was given some food.

He had no thought of finding his way back to his home. Whatever the summons which had come to him, it admitted of no return.

He wandered on and came to a stretch of open jungle by the dry bed of a stream. The sun was now growing hot and he turned into the shade to rest. Close by he heard a slight strumming of some instrument and as he came round a bend of the stream he saw a man sitting on the bank under a bael-tree. He was evidently a panner, a wandering musician, for he held a large yal, a harp-like instrument, and was tuning the strings. Its cover of red leather lay on the ground beside him. He was a man neither old nor young, with a clear golden skin, and wore his black hair fastened in a knot on the top of his head with a wreath of flowers around it. His single cloth, a long one reaching from waist to ankles, was of shimmering silk barred in different colours, so that it rippled in the sunlight like water in a bright stream. He wore several garlands about his neck, and in spite of the heat the flowers looked quite fresh.

The man smiled and nodded and went quietly on with his work. To Nallathan it seemed almost as if the stranger had been expecting him. So he went and sat down on the ground near him and watched him as he worked at the yal. Its nine strings were like twisted golden wires, and were fastened with gold pins. Its long handle was black and curved, and spreading at the top like a hooded cobra with gems for eyes.

"It's a beautiful yal," he said after a moment.

"Yes," the man said simply. "A king gave it me."

Nallathan looked at him curiously. He had heard many stories of these singers, who might be received one night at a palace and the next in the hut of a peasant. He wondered if a king had also given him his silken cloth.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Wherever I am," the man replied smiling. "My kind are wanderers without a home."

"I also am a wanderer, Nallathan told him, "I also am without a home."

"And in what direction are you going?"

"I don't quite know. Very far, I think, to the north. Perhaps to Kailas."

"That is a very long way indeed. Why do you not come with me? I also am going to the north, and my disciple has left me. I have no one to carry the yal. If you come with me and serve me, I will share what I have with you. And perhaps in the end we shall both reach Kailas."

Nallathan flushed. To be servant to a wandering singer was surely not what was meant for him. Yet what was he after all, now that he left his home, and was without his triple thread? Nothing but a wandering beggar in a dirty loin-cloth, and with nothing else but the silver moon in his hair. Nervously, in the old way his fingers sought for the thread that was not there. He was outcast, he could no longer claim the deference due to his birth. He had renounced his caste, his home, all that he had, and had been. Irresolutely he looked at the stranger. There was indeed something about him, something he could not define, but that drew one strangely. He was not, Nallathan thought, quite an ordinary minstrel.

"I will come," he said at last. "I will serve you." And he knelt at the man's feet, as a token of his submission. He felt for a moment a hand laid upon his head, lightly, with a great delicacy of touch.

"What is my master's name?" he asked when he was seated again.

"We who have many homes have also many names. But here in the villages they call me Tiruvan, or sometimes just "the Lame Wearer of Garlands".

Towards the cool of the day they set off upon their road. Nallathan put the cover on the yal and slung it over his shoulder. In his hand he carried a small copper water-jar. These were evidently their sole possessions.

When Tiruvan rose, Nallathan saw that he had one leg a little shorter than the other, and he walked haltingly.

After walking for some time between sandy hillocks and the creeping screw-pines they came within sight of the sea, and then following the shore they reached at dusk a little fishing-village, a few low-roofed huts, thatched with grass and bamboo. Fishing rods stood leaning against the walls like poles, great baskets were piled up beside the doors, and the long, knotted nets spread out upon the sand to dry. Children came running to meet them and led them to one of the huts. Soon a crowd had gathered about them bringing flowers and fish and rice. While a meal was prepared for them Tiruvan sang, and the fisher-girls, clad only in girdles of leaves, danced joyously on the hard sand.

Then they had their supper of roasted shrimps and boiled turtle, and fish slices cooked in a rice paste. Nallathan, who had never tasted fish or flesh, hesitated over the forbidden food. For a moment his gorge rose against it, but he looked at Tiruvan who was eating calmly.

"Who am I," thought Nallathan "that I should disdain the food my master accepts. I, an outcast wanderer, should take what is given."

But in spite of his resolve, the food lay heavy on his stomach, and after a while he went outside and was very sick.

For two days they went along by the shore, and on the third they reached a large city, just as the gates were being shut for the night. The shops were closed in the market place, and all the screens put down. Only the lighted brothels, with women seated at the windows, were opening their doors.

At last they found a small eating-house where a few late toddy-drinkers were still seated, and here they were given rather hastily a bowl of rice, with some kind of fried root, and jak-fruit seeds, which they took quickly, and then went on again through the dark streets, stumbling over the ruts made by the chariot-wheels passing to and fro. Nallathan pressed a little closer to his master. There is an eeriness at night in the streets of a dark and silent city that one does not feel in an open countryside. One shrinks even from the few passers by, who may be goblins roaming in human form, or at least thieves with chisels and sharp knives, and rope ladders twisted around their waists. But Tiruvan led the way to a small temple where the priest was known to him, and there they were given a small cell, scarcely more than a niche in the wall, just large enough for them to lie down and sleep there side by side.

In the night he woke, startled, for the little cell was aglow with a faint light, not bright yet strong enough to cast his own shadow on the wall, and pulsing softly and rhythmically like a heart-beat. He could not tell at first whence it came, then he realized with a tremor of fear that it was from Tiruvan's sleeping body.

His first impulse was to run away, to creep out from the cell, from the nearness of wonder and mystery, but his limbs would not move. He was held there in spite of himself, so he lay down again, shrinking, on the little mat, and pulled the coverlet over his head. He began to feel a sort of peace, as if the pulsing light were rocking him softly to and fro, like a leaf on a bough, swayed by the wind, soothingly. So at last he fell asleep, and when he woke in the morning he decided it was all a dream.

Nallathan was glad when they left the city and the shore behind them, and turned westward through fertile farmland with many villages and comfortable homesteads, with large rice-bins set on posts in the front yards, and carts and ploughs turned up against the walls, and large grindstones in a shed, and huge white bulls and many cows. Everywhere they could hear the rattle of sugar-mills, where the sugarcane juice was pressed out. On the outskirts of the fields young girls sat on high platforms and scared away the parrots with cane rattles and small drums; girls from whom Nallathan modestly turned away his eyes, but who cried out after him with laughter and teasing words.

Tiruvan was singing one morning outside a small village temple, just after the puja. He sat upon the temple steps with his yal, and a small knot of villagers clustered about him, listening to his song.

"Why standest thou to meet the King,
And mournest that he does not come?
Thou who art blind and canst not see,
Nor praise him for thy lips are dumb.

"Ah, so! But through the clamourous world
In a great silence so might I,
Alone yet in this waiting throng,
Have heard their shout as he drew nigh.

"I, even I who wait so long,
So long until my King shall pass,
Might, by the beating of my heart
Have known his footfall on the grass.

"And yet Alas! he cometh not.
They said: "He will not come to-day;
The gates are shut, the feast is done."
And one by one they went away.

"Yet in the silence of the night,
The darkness of the house of lust,
When all the trumpets are laid low,
The garlands fallen in the dust;

"I, a blind beggar by the way,
Seeking for remnants of his grace,
Shall hear a cry about mine ears,
Shall know a light before my face;

"Helpless and stricken where I lie,
Wearied by hope and bound by fear,
Shall hear a whisper on the wind,
"Awake, arise; thy King is here."

"His hand is laid upon my brow,
His touch is on my aching eyes,
The summons of his healing voice
That wakes and calls and bids me rise.

"My lips are touched with heavenly fire,
My eyes receive a vaster sight,
The blinding glory of the Lord,
The dark that is excess of light."

As he finished, Nallathan heard some one speak his name softly, in a voice weary yet eager, a voice well-known, which made him spring up, alert, and looking round he saw Kothaman standing there, with his pale thin face, with his tired gentle eyes. "Kothaman!" He sprang toward and grasped his hands with something like dismay. He had quite forgotten about Kothaman.

They sat down together on the temple steps, at a little distance from Tiruvan who was sitting, silent, his song ended, his head bent reflectively.

"I have followed you," Kothaman said, when he had got his breath, "from village to village. Sometimes I lost the trail for days, then picked it up again, but all the time I was not quite sure it was you. The word was always of a lame singer, and a boy with a silver moon in his hair. Oh, Nallathan, what does it all mean? What are you doing here? Where are you going? With a singer too! And you carrying his yal like a servant! You!"

"I am going where my master leads me, that is all. We go to the north, I think; perhaps to Kailas."

"Why did you not wait for me, Nallathan? Did I not promise long ago that I would follow you wherever you went?"

"I could not wait. I don't know, myself, just what happened. Suddenly I was far away and quite alone. And then I found my master. I am his servant, nothing else. But for me it is enough. Come, I will take you to him."

Tiruvan had laid aside his yal, and was sitting quietly, waiting for the boys to come to him. "So," he said, "the two friends meet again. Now there will be three of us on our way to Kailas."

And that was the way it turned out.

They had now been many weeks on the road. The hot weather was near, and they were still going westward, toward the Blue Hills and the high central plateau. Before long they left the villages behind them and were in high jungle, meeting no one but a few hunters now and then, primitive folk, armed with bows and arrows or short spears, who showed them their way, or sometimes led them to a bivouac in the forest where they slept on rough-sewn sheepskins by a fire kindled to keep off the wild beasts. They shared the food of the little hunters, the roasted flesh of porcupine or sometimes iguana. Nallathan had now a stronger stomach, and took his food without demur, but Kothaman, watching him with shocked eyes, ate only berries or the wild roots pulled in the jungle.

Sometimes they came to hunter villages, the clay huts thatched with grass, and fenced with strong palisades of logs. Here they had sour hill rice, flavoured with tamarind, and wild honey and fried venison—which was very good.

Here in the hills they found everywhere the frenzied worship of the Red God, Muruga, a form, it was claimed, of Kataragama. In the sacred enclosures the priestesses danced their wild dances, red thread tied about their wrists, and above them a banner with the rude figure of a cock. They made offerings of parched grain, and of rice or millet mixed with the blood of rams.

They brought back to Nallathan a shuddering recollection of the dancers he had seen on the Night of the Lord. In one place he saw, he was sure, the very woman who had so frightened him. He recognised her fiery, searching eyes. Even now, when he saw her looking at him, he felt his heart shrink. She too had some half recognition in her eyes, and came once or twice close to him as if to speak, but she said nothing. In the morning when they left he looked back, uneasily, and saw her standing by the gate, looking after them. Later at a turn of the forest path where he had lagged a little behind the others, he looked back once more, and again he saw her, or thought he did so, as if following them through the jungle. Alarmed, his heart beating violently, he quickened his steps, and caught up with the others. And after that he saw her no more.

But that day they lost their way in the jungle. In the late afternoon they were still wandering anxiously through a maze of forest paths, when suddenly they found their way barred by a group of little hunters, their arrows already fixed in their bows. Tiruvan, stepping forward, spoke to them, telling how they had lost their way, and one of the hunters left the rest, and said he would guide them to his village, but it was a long way and they must go quickly to reach it before dark. But even so the dusk fell while they were still in the jungle, and they thought soon that even their little guide was no longer quite sure of his way.

They came out at last into more open spaces with piles of stone and rubble lying about, overgrown with grass and wild thorn. It seemed to be the ruin of some large town, all but disappeared into the jungle. They could see what had once been rice-bins, burnt and blackened, and parts of walls jagged and tumbled, and a large tank on which the moon shone fitfully through tangled creepers and broken columns. Then they saw, not far off, a gleam of light, but its source was hidden from them by the many mounds. As Tiruvan turned toward it, the little hunter broke out in an ecstasy of fear. "No — no — do not go there. There is a she-devil living there. I did not know we were so near the place. Come away — come away."

"It is too late to go further," Tiruvan said, "here at least among these broken houses, we may find some sort of shelter for the night." And he turned again towards the light. But at that their guide gave a terrified squeak and fled. In a moment he was lost to sight in the jungle. Now they must indeed stay there, willingly or not.

They stood a moment in silence. An owl screeched, and a great hairy sow brushed by them in the long grass. A jackal lifted its quavering voice, and myriads of insects whirred and drummed, disturbed by their approach. The place was eerie enough, and there were horrible legends of goblins haunting the deserted homes of men, particularly of those slain in some savage raid. It was said that a demoness in the deserted kitchens brewed some hell-broth for them of unnameable things, and stirred it with a dead man's skeleton arm.

Nallathan trembled as they moved softly toward the light. Rounding a mound of stones, but keeping well in the shadow, they saw before them an open ground, paved and still level, what might once have been the court-yard of a palace. At one side a small shrine still stood there, with an image of Lord Shiva, more or less intact, and before it on a ledge of stone were several small lamps made of coconut shell with wicks of twisted grass. Before the shrine in the flickering light of the lamps some one was dancing, not the fierce demoness of legend, with cloven feet and fiery eyes who called up the dead men's corpses to be her partners, but a girl, delicate as a water-spirit, a young girl, slim, dark-skinned, with dark, curling hair falling to her waist. She wore a skirt woven of leaves, and the rest of her body was bare. She had a single red flower twisted in a lock of her hair. Her gaze was intent on the shrine, and the unconscious grace of her slim, swaying body was more beautiful for its very desolation. The movement of her dance came to an end, and she knelt for a moment on the bare stone, her head bent.

Without a word, softly, Tiruvan took the yal from Nallathan's shoulder, and slipped off its cover. Its first note made the girl quiver, then she seemed as if turned to stone while Tiruvan sang with a voice of infinite tenderness:

"Lo! the Lord of Kailas
Rapt upon the height,
With the snows for garment
In the unsullied light,

"Where the sacred waters
From his locks are fed,
He to whom the serpent
Bows its hooded head;

"Lo! the heart is open
To his holy sight
Where the lamp is burning
Lonely in the night;

"When the heart is kindled
In its inward shrine,
And the soul is lifted,
Lost in love divine."

In the silence that followed the girl rose swiftly to her feet. Like their hunter-guide, it seemed for a moment that she too would slip into the jungle and be lost, but after a moment's hesitation she came lightly toward them.

"Who are you" she asked, "who have come here where no one dares to come?" she spoke imperiously, half angry, half curious.

As they stepped out of the shadow she gazed at them with increasing surprise.

"You are strangers — yes. None of the hunter folk dares to come this way."

"We were lost, and our guide left us. We want only shelter for the night."

"Shelter you may have — if you are not afraid. There was room here once for a thousand men. Now for two or three you may find some roof unbroken."

"Where are your companions?"

"I have none."

"You live here quite alone?"

"Yes, quite alone." She laughed. "That's why they call me a demoness. Perhaps it's a good thing. They bring me milk and ghi and rice and fruits — something they would never do for my human need." Her voice had something of bitterness.

"How long have you been here?"

"A long time — oh, very long. But come, I will show you a place where you can sleep."

She took one of the coconut lamps in her hand and led them by a narrow path through the rubble, trodden out perhaps by her own feet, and they came to a series of high, narrow cells that had once perhaps been elephant stables. Some of them were still in fairly good condition, and she spread dried grass in one of them from a pile nearby.

"I will bring you some food. I had just cooked my supper and offered it to the Lord. It is prasad. I will bring it to you."

She slipped away in the darkness, leaving the lamp beside them, and returned in a moment, sure-footed through the darkness. She brought them two bowls of rice and curds, and fried plantains, and water in a little jar.

"But you have given us your own food. What will you eat?"

"I have milk. It is enough. Good-night." And she disappeared in the shadows.

They were too tired to wonder about her for very long, and so fantastic had the whole scene been that in the morning they almost expected to find her gone, like some illusion born of their own fatigue, but she was waiting for them, sitting by the old tank, beneath the vines.

"You can wash here," she said. "I am cooking food for you." And she slipped away. But she was soon back, this time with large bowls of rice and stewed meat, deer's meat, she told them, which the hunters left for her. She spread leaves for them upon the stone, and placed the food before them, and waited upon them. Only when they had finished would she come and sit with them, and answer their questions as to herself and her life.

Her name was Chilambi, which means "the Anklet". She was born far from that place but the town where she lived had been sacked in the Chola wars, and all her people slain. She herself had been carried off for a slave, but had escaped from her captors as they marched through the jungle. She had wandered about in great fear. They had received her rather unwillingly in the hunter villages for they were afraid of her from the first, so strange did it seem to them to find her wandering about alone. Then one day she had found this place, with the Shrine of the Lord, and had implored his protection. So she made her home here, and the people brought her food, as she had said, but they were more afraid of her than ever, and dared not come near the place after dark. That was why she had been safe for so long. And again there was bitterness in her voice. She had been here, she thought, about three years, though she had not kept track of the time.

"Now there will be four of us," Tiruvan said, "when we go upon our way."

They stayed for some days in the ruined city, and then set off again, Chilambi acting as their guide to the nearest village. The people gazed at her, horror stricken, but brought her cloth when she asked for it, in place of her skirt of leaves. They brought her anklets and ear-rings and a clasp for her arm, and a bundle of deerskins. Only they begged she would not stay there when night came. So they went again into the jungle, and made a fire as the hunters did when they camped, and spread out the deerskins, and there they slept.

8

THE ASHRAM

Time — The Present

When the spring came and the weather grew hot I left Delhi for the hills, stopping for a time at Hardwar, or Haridwar, beyond the Sivaliks, where the Ganges, the holy Ganga comes through its mountain gates, pouring its ceaseless waters to the plains. Hardwar is a holy city, filled with temples, with ascetics on their way to Rishikesh and the Himalayas, and with pilgrims who come to bathe in the sacred waters.

On the outskirts of the town, by an older course of the river, now dry, I was shown some low mounds said to be the ruins of the palace of King Daksha, the father of Sati.

At another place on the ghats, where the shore is very low, I found the pilgrims one day launching little boats of leaves, about a foot long, with a lighted candle for a mast and a delicate freight of flower petals. I bought a boat from a man who sat there making them quickly, folding the leaf and pinning it together with a thorn. I lit my candle and was about to set my boat upon the water when there was a protest and words mumbled in anger from some of the pilgrims nearby who were questioning one another "Who is she, that she comes here to profane our Gods and the worship of Ganga?"

While I hesitated my boat still in my hand, I heard a quiet voice say: "Let her worship Mother Ganga; she has come so far."

I turned quickly and looked into a woman's face, into her tranquil eyes. It was a moment before I recognised her as the woman who had been with Miles in the temple at Chidambaram. As she wore the gerua and evidently was known to many of the people there, there was no further protest as I knelt to launch my boat. It started off bravely enough, but as it circled uncertainly into the current a small gust of wind caught it and my candle was blown out; a very unlucky omen. The crowd again looked somewhat askance at me, and I turned to speak to the woman in gerua, but she was gone.

"Who was she?" I asked of the Brahmachari who had come with me from the ashram where I was staying.

"It was Tulasi Devi. She is a holy woman — oh, very holy. She passes through here sometimes on her way to the Hills."

That night for the third time, I dreamed of the child who clung to me, crying, in the darkness, of the Maruts, and I, who bent above him in unavailing love, in immitigable auguish, could hear my own voice echoing in another's, "Oh — my son — my son."

I left Hardwar soon after and did not see the woman again. By a somewhat circuitous route I reached the rail-head at Kathgodam, where I took a bus, a small, rickety, mountain bus which made its lively way up the steep passes, by immense gorges and perilous slopes, for some seventy miles along the coiling and ever-ascending road. We stopped halfway at a small village, a cluster of caddies and tea shops. In one of the shops I saw a sadhu sitting, writing hastily in a small note-book. He tore out a sheet and gave it to some one standing by, then returned the note-book to another. As he rose he saw me sitting alone in the front of the bus. All the other passengers had scrambled out to get themselves food and drink. He looked a little surprised, then ordered some one to bring me a cup of tea. "Take it," he said to me. "You have a long way to go."

There was the ghost of a smile on his lips, and I realized suddenly it was the sadhu I had seen sitting in the niche of the temple at Tanjore, and mistaken for an image. Now that he was standing I could see he was of middle stature, neither thin nor stout, with a strong and supple body, as if used to long and arduous climbs among the hills. He now got into the bus, and the other passengers, all returning in a crowd, made way for him reverently. And we resumed our journey.

The road wound up a long bare slope, then through a pine wood. Then the world seemed suddenly to have come to an end. Just ahead was a steep and sharp bend, and beyond it there was nothing, nothing at all, that one could see. I looked about me with something of alarm, but the other passengers were quite calm, and the sadhu undisturbed, so I concluded we were not really at so abrupt an end to our journey.

Bravely we swung round the sharp curve. It was not really the edge of the world, but it might have been, almost, so different was the vast scene now stretching out before us. Immediately at our feet was an immense valley, on such a scale as one could never see elsewhere, and rising from it from level to level, from end to end, the single gigantic line of the snows, shining like the ramparts of heaven. From Kedarnath to Nepal the range lay open, Badrinath, Trishul, Nanda Devi, Nanda Khot, Panch-Chuli, Api Numpa, the least of them more than 23,000 feet in height.

Breaking down through the lesser slopes a single way lay open, like a river-bed, but I did not see any water, only a flow of green from ledge to ledge, wheat-fields perhaps, or mountain rice. Following its ascent it seemed one might pierce to the mighty heart of the hills, and there was something gracious in it, as it thus opened itself, as if it said to me, "I am the way, and the truth and the life."

I found the bus had stopped, and the other passengers had got out and stood in little groups, while coolies shouldered their luggage. Other coolies pressed round me shouting; "Mem Sahib, Mem Sahib, luggage, Mem Sahib. Where Mem Sahib going?"

I got out and pointed to my one or two bags, which a coolie took up, a Pahari of incredible strength and agility, and started off toward the dak-bungalow, which I could see at some distance.

Just then the sadhu passed, striding along a path which led downhill away from the bazaar and the village. Without turning his head, "Come," he said to me briefly and authoritatively.

I called to the coolie who turned back and we followed the sadhu, at a little distance, down by the steep and stony path winding sharply down the hill.

In a very short time we had left the village behind us, hidden by the fold of the hill. Once only the sadhu turned round to see if we were coming. A brief smile illumined for a moment his rather stern features, then he went on as before, quite silently.

We had gone I think a couple of miles down the stark, treeless slope, and came now to greener land in the valley. Under a clump of rhododendron trees two ponies were waiting, and a light litter and a number of coolies. Then the sadhu turned to me: "You may pay off your coolie," he said. "You will not need him any more."

I gave the man a rupee and he went off, climbing back up the steep hillside, whistling cheerily. I felt a moment's uneasiness watching him go, as if some last link had snapped with the world I knew.

The coolies who were waiting, little short stocky men, were busy fastening my bags on one of the ponies. Then they signed to me to get into the litter, a sort of rustic "sedan chair", made of canvas and light wood, and slung from transverse poles, which four coolies carried on their shoulders, two at each end. The sadhu mounted the second pony and we set off toward the hills.

At nightfall we were still traversing the wide valley. We came to a small village, just a few houses of whitewashed stone roofed with heavy slates. I climbed a ladder-like staircase to an upper room, bare but fairly clean. One of the coolies brought up my supper of coarse chapatis and a curry of potatoes and beans. The only light was a small lamp, just a twist of cord for a wick in a little clay bowl of ghi. It winked out before I had finished undressing, but I crawled into bed in the dark and slept till morning, when a servant wakened me bringing a little kettle of tea. The litter was waiting for me when I went down but the sadhu was nowhere to be seen. The coolies pointed up the road to show he had gone on ahead of us.

I saw we were making for the green gap in the hills which I had seen the day before, and soon we were climbing up among the fields. Then we turned off to the right among tall, spare pines, with beautiful reddish and silver bark.

It was midday before we caught up with the sadhu, who was sitting cross-legged under one of the pine trees. A servant had made a fire of twigs and our meal was already cooked and waiting for us. After a rest of two or three hours we went on again, always ascending, and spent the night in another village, almost indistinguishable from the first. So the journey went on for several days, yet I do not think we had actually gone a very great distance. The coolies' progress was slow, and ten or fifteen miles was a day's journey. And all the time the sadhu never spoke, and I — I did not know where I was going, but it was toward the higher mountains and that was enough.

We left the dry pine country behind us, and came to a moister soil with forests of evergreen oak, short, grey-leaved trees, with an occasional deodar or rhododendron among them. We splashed through several mountain streams, which flowed not as I would have expected down toward the valley and the way we had come, but always going deeper into the hills. The path was narrow and stony, merely a mule-track. In some places it broke down altogether and we crept along sharp ledges which were always on the point of crumbling away beneath us. We passed many small villages, their slate roofs weighed down with stones against the mountain winds, and golden grain spread out upon them to dry, so that looking down upon them from above one could scarcely distinguish them from the fields. A harvest of some sort was already being gathered, I don't know of what kind of grain. Women, clad in full skirts, and long white head-cloths caught in at the waist, and tight vests over bright-coloured blouses, bent to their work on slopes of incredible steepness where it seemed impossible they could keep a foothold. But they worked swiftly with their short flashing sickles, and towards evening one saw them climbing up to the road, the sheaves borne upon their heads in enormous stacks. The little slender figures, with bare brown feet and heavy silver anklets looked scarcely large enough to bear them.

We passed sometimes a tall brown temple, its curving tower bent like a bow, half hidden among the deodars, and sometimes, nearby on the bank of a stream, a burning-ghat with the fire still smouldering.

Once or twice a light thunder-shower blew up, and afterwards the little leaves on all the oak-trees flashed in the sun like thousands of tiny mirrors.

On the last day of our journey we wound along a high ridge, a saddle between two broad valleys. We had left the oak country and were somewhat lower again among bare hills and scattered pines and cactus. Looking down on my left I saw, halfway down the great slope and clinging perilously to a rocky ledge, a small group of buildings, overtopped by three tall pines. All around them spread out the vast and mazy circles of the hills, sheer, bare, rocky, giving back the light, all on an incredible scale, so that the buildings were dwarfed to the size of small match boxes and the little temple tower looked no larger than a thimble. And high to the north, immense above these lessers heights, the great snows opened their shining wings. They seemed very little nearer for all our long journey. A narrow path led down from the road, and we turned into it. Even the sure-footed mountain ponies slipped a little on the loose pebbly soil. But we arrived safely.

A long ledge of rock, closed with a single gateway, led to a larger terrace, around which the buildings were grouped, a central hall, not very large, a kitchen, the little temple, several buildings with small cells for bedrooms in one or two stories, sometimes with store-rooms below. All were built securely of stone with roofs of heavy stone slates. The walls were plastered with mud, covered with a dull, tawny wash, much the same colour as the hill itself, so that from a distance they were almost invisible. At the back the steep hill sheltered them, but in front the sheer cliff fell away abruptly to the little river, perhaps two thousand feet below.

Further off, where the slope was not so steep, were cowsheds and barns, and one or two small huts for the servants and herdsmen. There were several terraced fields, and a little garden plot with flowers and vegetables and a few fruit trees, cherries and plums and apricots, and one orange tree in a sheltered spot, and hedges of spirea and prickly-pear cactus.

I was shown to one of the upper cells, small and clean and bare, with a plank bed and a table, a wooden chair, and a copper jar of water. There was one small window, without glass, closed only by a shutter, but it faced the snows and lying in my bed I could see the great temple-like peak of Nanda Devi, flushed to a burning rose in the sunset light.

The bells and great gongs were clashing for the evening puja, so I rose hastily and washed and went down to the little temple. There were three or four sadhus, one very old, and perhaps half a dozen Brahmacharis, novices, several servants, and a number of pilgrims. Only the sadhus and Brahmacharis entered the temple; the rest of us sat without in the larger porch. There was in any case not room enough for every one inside.

When the puja was finished, which lasted about an hour, I returned to my room, and after a little while my supper was brought to me by one of the Brahmacharis, followed by a servant carrying a lantern. The meal was laid out on the little table; and the Brahmachari sat with me while I ate in the dim light of the lantern. All the food, he told me, was first offered in the temple, so that it became 'prasad', and was hallowed, and was very good for one both physically and spiritually. He and the other Brahmacharis did all the cooking themselves, the servants only the washing up. Sometimes, on great occasions, the sadhus also helped with the cooking, and prepared special dishes for the God. The sadhu who had brought me here was, he said, Swami Atulananda. The old sadhu, the head of the ashram, was Swami Ashokananda. His own name, he said, was Madhav. Many pilgrims passed this way, at this season of the year, on their way to Kailas. For the rest of the year it was very quiet.

When I had finished my supper, he called the servant to take away the dishes, also the lantern. The oil was costly, he said, and difficult to obtain. But he left me a little clay lamp of ghi, scarcely larger than a tea spoon, which burnt just long enough for me to get into bed.

The night was very still, utterly soundless save for the whirring and drumming of various insects, and after a while even that ceased. Then the wind rose a little, sighing through the pines, and rattling my window shutters slightly, with secretive fingers, and then went off again, unsatisfied, curious, upon other guests. And I slept at last, for I, at least, had found a resting-place for a little time.

The weather was fine and still and clear, and the first few days I spent walking about the hills, learning what I could of the countryside. Also I walked to a little town, some miles off, where I was able to buy some candles and a small spirit-stove, and a package of tea.

No one in the ashram questioned me as to why I had come, or what I intended to do there. Swami Atulananda had brought me and that was enough for them. It was not always enough for me, but I looked for no answer from that silent sadhu — at least, not yet.

I went always to the morning and evening pujas, and now was allowed to enter the temple itself. I took my midday meal in the hall with the sadhus and Brahmacharis, and my supper was brought to me in my room by Madhav and the servant, as on the first night; and tea I made for myself when I wanted it. There was always a bowl of milk put for me on a shelf, usually buffalo milk, thick and white, but not so sweet as cows' milk. But the cows here in the mountains were very small, hardly larger than one of our calves, and gave only a cupful of milk at a time. It was kept for the most part for the sick, or for the children, or for making special dishes.

There was a small library, with many Sanskrit books, and a few English works, chiefly of philosophy. But I did not read very much. In fact I did nothing very much. Sometimes I sat and talked in the hall with the sadhus. Sometimes I visited the old Swami Ashokananda who had his own little house beside the temple. He was very quiet and spoke very little. There seemed no need to speak. Sitting with him in the small bare room I was conscious of some communion with him far more subtle than speech, which left always a curious peace in my heart. He was a largish, fair man, his skin quite smooth in spite of his advanced age, his features plain enough and nothing in his face of particular distinction except a general quietness and kindliness. Only sometimes when he came from the temple he was transfigured so that one scarcely recognised him. His very features seemed altered, and like Moses returning from Sinai, the skin of his face shone and made what was almost a visible halo about his head. Sitting there in his room he would fall again and again into a sort of trance, unconscious of me, of his surroundings. And I sat there, wonderingly, till one of the sadhus, coming in, looked into his face softly and earnestly, and gently signed to me to withdraw.

One morning I rose for the early puja which I did not usually attend. It was some day of peculiar holiness and Swami Ashokananda brought an offering of milk-cake which he had cooked himself, a little rounded pudding-like thing, which looked rather like a blancmange just turned out of its bowl, but firmer, made of ground rice and milk. He placed it in the centre of the altar with the usual flowers and ghi and coconuts. The puja was short and after it all withdrew, the door was locked as usual, and Swami Atulananda took the key with him. I remained in the porch for one or two hours, meditating, perhaps dozing a little. Then I saw the others returning for the second puja. Swami Atulananda took the key from his pocket, and as the door swung open I heard a sudden exclamation, and they stood there on the threshold without going in. Then one of the Brahmacharis ran quickly to find Swami Ashokananda, who was not yet come. Curiously I also went to the door and peered in, but they would not let me enter. At first I could not see anything amiss. Then I saw that part of the milk cake was gone. We had left it whole and carefully rounded; now one could see long finger-marks, where a hand had come and scooped away about a third of it. Yet the door had been locked all the time, as I knew myself. No one had passed that way, and on the other side there was but one small barred window above the sheer cliff.

Now Swami Ashokananda came and entered the temple. He bowed humbly before the altar, his face touching the earth, while the others watched him with a sort of loving awe. Then he rose again and went quietly away. The others still stood there speaking in excited whispers.

"It sometimes happens," my friend Madhav explained to me, "but only when Swami Ashokananda prepares and offers the food, that the God himself comes and partakes of it. You can see the finger-marks there quite plainly."

Which I could indeed. But whether of God or ghost or demon, how was I to tell? Of one thing only I was sure; it could not possibly be the mark of a human hand.

9

SWAYAMVARA

Time — Legendary

In the palace at Hardwar the lists were finished, the Princes assembled. Day after day the contests had continued. Now the Princess was to make her choice.

The marriage chests were filled with silken quilts and garments, with gold and jewels, with vessels of brass and copper, with cushions and coloured mats; all the wealth of her dowry.

Sati came at last from her chamber, with her maidens attending her, two of them carrying the garland, threaded with gold and pearls, to the dais where her parents stood, the King, Daksha, and his Queen. She wore a garment finely woven and threaded with gold. She wore jewelled anklets and her arms were clasped with gold above the elbow; heavy necklaces weighed down her young shoulders. Her hair was dressed with a light diadem of gold inwoven with fresh flowers. Heavy gold rings hung from her ear-lobes. She moved calmly with something of stateliness in her maiden gait. As she took her place upon the dais a murmur of wonder and admiration rose from the crowd. The suitors came forward one by one, proudly, each bringing his gift to lay at her feet. They passed before her, and took their places in a line below the dais. As each one passed she was told his name. The choice was hers, yet her father, her mother, her brothers, had all come to her, separately and told her she must choose such or such a one. She bowed her head to them meekly, but she kept her own counsel.

Now she descended the steps, and her maidens gave the garland to her. Slowly she went along the line, proudly and fearlessly, looking earnestly into the face of each. They were all handsome, richly dressed, the sons of Kings, both brave and skilled as they had shown in the contests. But it appeared that in none of them did she find the thing she sought. She came to the end of the line, hesitated thoughtfully, then turned and slowly retraced her steps, not regarding the Princes now, but pondering, her head bent.

There was a movement among the crowd, a whisper like the rustle of leaves, a look of surprise, of embarassment from those upon the dais. Then surprise swelled to amazement, the whisper was checked in fear. For among the Princes there had appeared, strangely, another and incongruous figure; an ascetic clad only in a tiger-skin, his body smeared with ashes, a trident in his hand, and (or so it was said afterwards) a live serpent coiled about his arm, for an armlet.

There was a pause, a moment fateful with suspense, which none could break. All stood there, still, silent, watching. The Princess took a single step forward, her eyes wondering, but confident, determined. With infinite grace she raised her arms, and placed the garland, softly, deftly about the stranger's neck.

Then the spell was broken and the uproar broke loose. Her brothers leaped from the dais, the Queen fainted, the King shouted to the captain of the guard, the soldiers rushed forward to seize the intruder. But he could not be found. He had gone as mysteriously as he had come. Only the Princess stood quietly, gravely, firmly. And all she would say to the outraged suitors, to the angry King, to her furious brothers was, "I have chosen. He is my Lord."

The crowd dispersed. The Princes called their attendants and departed, their very chariot wheels giving out sparks of wrath.

The Queen in her distress sought her daughter in her chamber, where Sati sat unmoved. She wept and expostulated, vainly, receiving only again and again the stubborn answer : "He is my Lord. I must go to him."

"But who is he? Where are we to send you?"

"I will go to the hills. He will meet me there."

So at last the chests were packed in carts, and a litter prepared for the Princess, and they set off from Hardwar to the hills. After a little the carts could go no furher and were sent back, all the baggage was transferred to the backs of slaves, and they went on again, climbing higher and higher up the narrow mountain tracks, turning eastward toward Kailas.

Sati remained steadfast to her purpose, though her heart sank within her. She could not tell what inner faith sustained her, but that she was both guided and protected she firmly believed.

Yet she followed a dream, or so it often seemed. Once, she saw him. From the side of a gorge, up which their path wound, she looked across to a low point where two streams met, and on the point was a small temple with steps going down to the water, and spreading above it a large pipal tree. And there on the little terrace, gazing down upon the water, an ascetic stood, white with ashes, wearing the ochre loincloth and a necklace of rudraksha beads, with a long trident for a staff. She called her steward and directed him to turn their caravan across the stream to the temple. But by the time they found a fording place and moved everything across, a full hour had gone by, and when the Princess reached the temple the ascetic was gone.

She sat on the terrace beneath the pipal tree, considering what she would do. The gorge was narrow, and still very hot though the cold weather was approaching. For the first time she felt her courage fail. Oh, why did he not come? How could she go farther without him? But the calm of the little temple quieted her in spite of her fears, and she began to look about her, her courage reviving. At a little distance was a small hill-fort, half in ruins, but habitable at least in part. She decided to remain there. Her attendants made ready a room for her, covered the rude walls with hangings, and made her bed with quilts and white sheets. The next day they sent to the scattered villages for labourers, who rebuilt the walls and repaired the rooms, and put in new shutters and doors, so that in time the house was comfortable enough. Here she stayed throughout the winter, praying daily in the temple, weeping often in her bed at night, ashamed in spite of herself before her whispering attendants.

She bathed in the icy stream, or lay on the cold stones, and fasted, as if by these rigours she could melt that unknown heart.

When the warmer weather came again and the gorge grew hot, she came to a fresh decision. She dyed a white cloth with the ochre soil, and put it on for her only garment. She cut off her long hair, and took a single waterpot in her hand.

"Go back," she told her attendants who stood by, appalled. "Go back, and take all these things with you. It is not thus that my Lord wishes me to come to him. Go back to Hardwar and say to my father that I am no longer the daughter of Daksha. I am Parvati, the Daughter of the Mountains. I am the child of Himalaya. I have no other kin but these."

Then she was gone from them, and they dared not follow her. So they returned to Hardwar and told the King that his daughter was mad and had fled away into the hills.

Parvati went, begging her food, from village to village, in her ochre robes, ascending always higher in the mountains, until she came at last in sight of the great snows. "It is here," she said, "that my Lord dwells. I need go no further. It is here He will come to me."

There above the meeting valleys a single hill rose high between two rivers. Climbing along a narrow ridge, she found a small cave where she lay for the night. In the morning she climbed a sheer rock-face to where on the highest point was a small temple, a single cell, with a small porch, and a gilded spire. Close by was a little house, one room, so low she could scarcely stand upright in it. All around it was the wild jungle, with oak and pine and rhododendron, and sharp thickets of thorn and cactus.

"This shall be my home," she said. "Here shall He come to me."

Day after day she went back and forth on the short path between her house and the little temple. She begged in the villages for a little coarse meal to make her bread. She began to know the roots and berries in the wood; which were harmful, which could safely be used as food. She grew bent and meagre as the years went by, her skin withered with wind and sun and cold. She lay shivering on winter nights in spite of a small fire of twigs or pine-cones, while the snow fell and icicles hung from her house-eaves, glittering in the moonlight like crystal swords. So that at last she said, "What use if my Lord comes now? He will not know me. He was chosen by a Princess, and what am I now but an old misshapen beggar? Yet what else shall I do but wait for Him? If I cannot be His wife, I shall be the least of His servants. But let Him come, let Him come soon. He is immortal. He forgets that I am only a woman, and my span of life is short. Soon it will be too late, too late. Must I die and be born again, and seek Him through another life, perhaps through many lives? Oh, it is too long a time, too long, too long. Oh, that I knew where I might find Him. Where is the guide—the appointed guide—who shall lead me on that mysterious way? Day and night do not hold what I am seeking. The sun does not shine upon it, the moon knows it not. The winds bear no word to me. The snows speak of it, and that is all. But their message is lost in the dissolving waters, borne away far off to some unimaginable ocean, the measureless ocean where Vishnu sleeps upon the coils of the serpent of eternity.

"Yet my Lord bears the moon on His forehead and the waters of the holy river flow through His tangled hair. So great is my Lord, so beyond all knowledge. Must I wait through a thousand ages, through the passing of a thousand worlds, till that world at last is created which may reveal Him to me? Oh, it is too long, too long. Come to me now, as I am, a woman, weeping, weeping for the coming of her Lord."

10

THE LONG ROAD

Time — The Past

Nallathan and his companions were coming now out of the jungle into more settled country, grassland, where they passed great flocks of sheep and goats, and at night they stayed in the herdsmen villages, hedged with thorn. Everywhere one heard the clacking of churns, and milk and buttermilk and curds were served to them plentifully. They slept comfortably in rope-beds spread with straw and thick fleeces.

At one place they fell in with a band of strolling actors and mountebanks, and went along with them for a few days on their route from village to village. One or two of the band went always ahead, a day in advance, so that when they arrived anywhere they found the stage already set up and everything in readiness for their performance and the villagers eagerly waiting for them.

The actors were kindly, friendly people, generous and quick-witted, proud of their skill, were it only in tumbling, and very jealous of their reputations. In many of the poorer villages they received very little for their work, yet they always gave of their best.

There was one girl who danced on her hands on the tight-rope with incredible skill, her lithe body seeming all but weightless as it swayed in the air, and who smiled on Nallathan when she saw him watching her with naive admiration. She was very curious about Chilambi. "Who is she?" she asked Nallathan. "You say she is a dancer; yet she keeps by herself and does not dance."

With some hesitation Nallathan told something of Chilambi's history, and of their meeting in the jungle. But it only increased the suspicion in which Chilambi was held by the players.

On Tiruvan too they looked strangely and surmised he was not altogether what he seemed, for he sang only in the temples and took no money.

But one day, at least, Chilambi danced. She took with her the musicians from the troupe, and went to a small snake-temple, just outside the village, and there before the image of the Nagaraja she danced slowly and gravely, while one of the players sang an ancient chant.

"Homage be to the snakes,
The secret ones,
Wherever they move along the earth.
Homage be to those snakes,
Who move subtly in the heavens.
Swift as lightning,
Bright as the rays of the sun.
Homage be to those snakes,
Which are the arrows of sorcerers,
Which sway with the tree-spirits,
Which lie in holes,
Which have their abode in the waters.
Homage be to all these,
They are secret and powerful.
May they be gracious to us."

But the tight-rope girl was even more suspicious. "I believe she is a snake-spirit herself," she told Nallathan, "Or else why is she so strange? No girl could have lived in the jungle, in the ruins of a city, the way she pretended she did. She is a sorceress or a ghoul, She is evil and will do you some harm. She is only waiting for the right time. Why do you not leave these people and come with us? With us you would be safe, and we would teach you to play on the yal. Then if you made enough money, perhaps some day my father would give me to you in marriage. He is the head of our band." And she looked at Nallathan with naive pride.

"I am vowed to my master," Nallathan told her, with some regret in his voice, for she was very pretty, and he admired her agile skilful body.

"Very well," she said, rising abruptly. "At least I have warned you, which was very kind of me, for you are nothing to me. Some day perhaps you will remember it, only then it may be too late. I have seen her looking at you, and I think you are in great danger. Perhaps it is already too late, and you are even now under her spell. And it's your own fault if anything happens to you, for I have warned you and tried to save you." And with a little toss of her pretty head, she went away.

She avoided Nallathan for the rest of the day, and the next day they parted. For they reached a crossroad, and on one side of it a little twist of grass had been tied to a small stick and thrust into the ground.

"This is the way we must go," the players said. "This is the sign we follow from place to place, left for us by those who have gone ahead."

But Tiruvan had turned another way; so they parted, following each their own sign.

Towards evening when they turned for the night into the shelter of a grove of trees, for they were still some dis-

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tance from a village, Tiruvan bade Kothaman beg some fire; for they could see one burning at a little distance among the trees.

"There are two women there," Kothaman said, returning. "Sannyasinis. They are preparing their food and ask us to share it with them."

The two women, one approaching middle-age, the other young, and both wearing the gerua, had made a small hearth of stones, and set their cooking-pots upon it. The elder woman was tall and pale, with a spare, ascetic face which had perhaps been beautiful when she was younger, when the thin lips were fuller, and the lines of her body less severe. Even now she was gracious, calm, self-reliant, commanding; though she spoke little, only a word or two to her companion, directing her in the elaborate ritual of preparing the food. She looked up as they approached, and greeted Tiruvan by name, simply, with dignity. They had never met before. "But who," she said, "could fail to recognise the Lame Wearer of Garlands?"

Her name was Subhadra, she told them, and the girl, Kamini, was her disciple. They had led a wandering life for several years, going from place to place, without purpose or direction, as the Lord might guide their passive feet. But now their faces, too, were turned to the north, toward Kailas.

Besides their two cooking-pots, they had a small yal and a hand-drum, which they used in their many devotions. A little bundle of clothing completed their list of possessions; but Subhadra, it appeared, thought even this too much.

Kamini, who was still very young, not more than sixteen, was very shy, and kept her face turned away, half hidden by her cloth. But when she spoke, softly, in answer to the other, her voice was very sweet, and her eyes lustrous when they looked on Subhadra, filled with her complete devotion. She was quick to serve her, light on her feet and graceful, running quickly to the stream for water, fetching more sticks for the fire — but in this she was helped by Chilambi who joined her, silently, in her task.

"We are six now," Tiruvan said, "on our way to Kailas." And in the morning, in the early light, he sang an old chant, an invocation for grace upon their way:

"May the winds bring us happiness,
May the rivers carry happiness to us,
May day and night yield us happiness,
May the dust of the earth bring us happiness,
May the heavens give us happiness,
May the sun pour down happiness."

He was very gentle in his manner to Kamini, and Kothaman too was anxious to help her, walking often at her side, carrying the cooking-pots, helping her across the streams, or over the rougher paths. Subhadra appeared not to notice it, but then she noticed very little, going her own way, a little apart from the rest, her body held very straight, a little rigid, and the prayer-beads slipping endlessly through her fingers.

They stopped at a wayside caddy to buy food, and they found there two other travellers, a young man from the south with his sister. There was something tragic in their demeanour, and later, when his sister was sleeping in the noonday heat, the young man, Kashinath, told their story. His sister, Shanti, had some months since been seized with a sudden frenzy while working in the fields, and had murdered her mother with her sickle, also an older sister and an uncle who tried to restrain her. Then the frenzy had left her as suddenly as it had come, but the people of her village would have dragged her off and killed her, so terrified were they, so enraged, believing her possessed by a devil. But he had rescued her and they had run off together into the jungle and hidden there. Later, in the night, he had returned to their home, secretly, and brought away some money, and some other few necessities for a long journey. Now they were on their way to Kailas where they hoped to make some expiation for her dreadful crime. And yet, he said, he did not believe it was really his sister who had done such a deed. She was a good, quiet girl, full of affection for those very people she had killed and anxious always to please them. Some devil had indeed possessed her body, and used it for his own evil purpose. And yet as it was her hand which had struck the blow, the guilt must be hers to some extent, and must be atoned for.

When the girl awoke they could not help regarding her curiously. She seemed quiet enough, and gentle in her manner, but her eyes had a puzzled look and her lips trembled continually. She had a thin face with a sharp chin, and her eyes were deeply set, and staring. She clung always to her brother's hand and would not be separated from him for a moment. His tender, anxious care for her was very touching. He watched over her particularly at noonday, when he thought, evidently, that she was in some peculiar peril. "It was the demon of noonday," he kept repeating to them, "who seizes on the unsuspecting soul, when one is weary of the light and the long day, and longs for evening and the shadow."

"Now we are eight," Tiruvan said, "and I think there is one more yet to come."

Two days later they were joined by the red priestess from the hills, the priestess of Muruga, who had, it appeared, been following them all the time. Her single cloth was tattered and travel-stained, her locks loose and wild, her wrists were tied with the red cord, and her eyes bloodshot and roving. She gave no reason why she had followed them so far, so secretly; she slipped into their company, took her place among them, and Tiruvan, appeared to be not at all surprised. She was called Murugayi, but whether that was her name or merely the designation of her office was not clear. Her restless, searching eyes went keenly from one to other of their company as they walked in silence on the hot plains or rested in groves or villages. She observed each in turn with a fierce penetration, but her gaze dwelt most often on Nallathan, and it became her habit, when they took up their way again, to fall into step beside him. She asked him much about the others, and to his explanations she added her own veiled comments.

Over Shanti she shook her head. "It may have been a devil," she said, "but he could never have possessed her if she had not opened a way to him. She is much to be pitied, but she is not guiltless; oh, no, far from guiltless."

Over Chilambi she hesitated. "I feel her in my soul, yet I cannot tell what I feel. She is strange, she is deep and strange, and she keeps much concealed. I feel drawn to her, and again I feel repelled. I shall know more of her in time."

Of Tiruvan she said only, "He is what he is."

"But you," she observed one day to Nallathan, "you have the mark on your forehead. I saw it there when you were a child."

Nallathan rubbed his forehead thoughtfully. "So it was you, then, that time in the temple?"

"Yes, it was I. And you were afraid. You are afraid of me now."

"Yes — a little."

She laughed, rather harshly. "Sometimes it is good to fear — but not too much."

She went away, but she came back again later. "You must watch Chilambi," she said. "I have written your names in the dust. And your fate is in her hands."

This surprised Nallathan, for Chilambi was always with Tiruvan, and in spite of what the player-girl had said, he did not think she noticed him very much. But now he became more curious about her, and took to watching her covertly, when he thought she was not looking.

He saw her sitting often by herself, her head bent on her hand, her face sad and a little stern. But whether she brooded on the past, on the wrongs she had suffered, on the cruelties she had witnessed, or whether she pondered on the future, on where her way might lie, she spoke of it to no one, and he was no wiser than before.

Murugayi like the others showed a peculiar tenderness to Kamini. In the evening while supper was cooking she sometimes went and sat near her, though she did not speak, and Kamini in her shyness appeared not to notice her.

Once, Nallathan and Murugayi, returning a little in advance of the others from a village where they had gone to beg for food, found Kamini and Subhadra already there in the banyan grove where they were staying. It was nearing noonday, and very hot, and Subhadra was sleeping, lying on the ground in the shade. Kamini sat beside her with the small yal, and she was singing softly, very softly so as not to waken her. They sat down at a little distance, not wishing to disturb her, but they could hear the words of her song, for around them the grove was very still.

"I bow to the Lord
In the form of my guru.

I bow to her lotus feet
And to her loving kindness,
I bow to her seated before me
As a mortal, as immortal.

Upon the earth
Beneath yonder banyan tree
Is truth itself,
Giving to me in silence and holiness
The light that overcomes all darkness,
Healing my heart of evil,
Cleansing my eyes
That they may see.

I bow to the Lord
In the form of my guru,
I bow to her lotus feet,
To her whose hand
Is uplifted in blessing,
Whose love is without end,
Who has pity
On the low estate of her handmaid,
And lifts me up
To be one with her
In purity and grace.

To her, stainless and serene,
In whose eyes is the light of life,
In whose heart is truth,
In whose speech is holiness,
To her I bow down.

May I follow her sacred footprints
Till my soul outreaches
The limits of the body,
And we are one in the Lord.

As the song ended they could hear the others returning, and Kamini quietly put away her yal. Subhadra, awaking, rose and went away without looking about her, her thin austere face quite expressionless. She went to a level rock near the stream, where she was accustomed to go for meditation, and sat down there, silently and alone, for Kamini did not follow her.

They went slowly on their way, week after week crossing the great central plateau. It was more than a year now since Nallathan had left his home. He thought very little of it, of his people. He had only Kothaman to remind him of it, and Kothaman was silent.

One evening, looking for shelter and finding no village at hand, they came upon a series of caves cut in a shallow cliff. A narrow path, tunnelled through the rock, led up to them, the passage much tumbled down and overgrown with a thorny scrub, but still guarded by two large, carved elephants with upraised trunks. Here they cut their way through the scrub and came out on the rock-face. The place had evidently been at one time a large monastery. There were many shrines and temples, some deep, some shallow, with innumerable images of the Lord Buddha in all his many mudras and his many incarnations, and a number of large halls, and many small cells which had served as living quarters for the monks. A path led from one to the other but it was broken in several places, and most of the caves were in ruins.

After scrambling about for some time they found one which was still habitable. It was a very large cave with a central hall and finely carved pillars. Opening off it, on three sides, were small cells, each with two stone platforms, where the monks had slept.

They lit a small fire of thorn to cook their evening meal which was necessarily a light one, for they carried few provisions with them, depending everywhere on the charity of the villagers. Then they lay down upon their stony beds, Kothaman and Nallathan in one cell, Subhadra and Kamini in another, the brother and sister in a third. Murugayi and Chilambi chose one at a little distance from the rest. Tiruvan lay in the outer hall, across the doorway, as if to protect them.

Nallathan was very tired and fell at once into a heavy sleep, but it seemed to him that after a little while he woke. From his bed he could see into the outer hall, where there was still a faint glimmer of light from the embers of the fire. There was no sign of Tiruvan. But watching, Nallathan perceived a faint movement in the shadow, and feeling a little alarmed he rose softly and stole out, keeping well hidden himself in the shadow of the wall. The thing moved again and he saw it was a great serpent. It rose and spread its hood and swayed back and forth near the fire. It looked nearly as tall as a man. It must, Nallathan thought as he watched it fearfully, be the very Nagaraja himself, the King of all the snakes.

It suddenly flattened itself and moved stilly to the door. In spite of his fear Nallathan followed it, fascinated. Outside the moon was rising and gave enough light to see the path, which looked white in the moonlight, and the snake was a single black line drawn along it. He followed until it turned abruptly and slipped through a chink into one of the ruined caves. The opening was very narrow, a long slit in the cliff, but with a little effort he managed to slip through. He stumbled for a moment in the darkness, fearful of treading on the great snake, then suddenly blinked, for there was a dazzle of light about him and he found himself standing in the great hall of a palace.

There was the Nagaraja upon his throne, beautiful, smiling, with the seven-hooded serpent above his head. Around him were many women, some with fans in their hands, and a band of women musicians with long drums and transverse flutes. Before the King a girl was dancing in a skirt of barred silk; she had jewelled anklets hung with little golden bells which sounded musically to the rhythm of her dance. He saw the figure of another dancer, standing silently in the background, which looked very like Chilambi; it had her characteristic pose, her head bent on her hand, her face thoughtful.

Jewelled lamps hung from the ceiling in which burned a scented oil, shedding light and fragrance. Silken draperies, stretched between red-lacquered pillars, gave a warmth and richness of colour.

As Nallathan looked about him, wonderingly, the King smiled again and beckoned him toward the throne, holding out in his hand a great jewel, as if offering it to him.

He took a step nearer and stretched out his hand. The musicians stopped and waited in a tense silence, the dancers were still. The girl who was like Chilambi turned her head, softly, watching him, breathless, in still suspense.

The jewel shone in the King's hand, clear as crystal, and the whole scene was reflected in it, held in it, as if by enchantment.

Again he took a step forward, then stopped. His hand fell to his side in a strange helplessness. He felt before him an invisible barrier which he could not cross; it needed but a single step, yet he could not take it. He stood there, his head bent, held by a cold dread, the fear of a great illusion, of challenging a nameless power.

There was a shout of laughter from the women behind him, and the girl who was like Chilambi lifted her face to his, a wordless reproach in her eyes, which were bright with tears.

The musicians beat their drums, but no sound came, no sound from the flutes, or from the women's lips. The dancer was held, motionless, in the midst of her dance. Everything was frozen suddenly into silence and immobility. Then the light went out, and Nallathan fell in the darkness, with a single cry.

He felt a hand shaking him, and opened his eyes to find himself lying on his stony bed, and the outer cave filled with sunlight. Kothaman was standing by him, still shaking him and crying, "Nallathan, wake up." Then in a tone of relief, "You were sleeping so soundly I thought at first you were dead. Please get up and come to see the caves. They are covered with paintings such as no one has ever seen before. And in one of them there is a picture of Chilambi."

Kothaman led him along the path, just as the serpent had done, and they came to the same cave, only some one had cleared away all the rocks from the entrance and they went in quite easily. The others had all gathered there, and the cave itself was illumined by the sunlight reflected from the shining rocks outside.

Nallathan looked about him, dumbfounded for here was the very scene of his dream. There was the Nagaraja seated upon his throne, there were the women with fans, the musicians and the dancer, and there in the background was the girl who was like Chilambi. But it was all a painting on the wall, not living as it had been to him.

Chilambi herself was standing there near the door, and turned as he came in, her eyes meeting his with that same wordless reproach, the same bright mist of tears, which made him hang his head, as if he had somehow failed, as if it was because of him that the dancers were lifeless patterns on a wall, that no sound came from the drums or flutes, that no jewel shone in the King's hand.

The others looked, wondering, at the picture of Chilambi and crowded round Tiruvan, as if expecting some explanation. But he only said, "Do you think it is the first time we have come this way?" And he added slowly after a pause. "The forms come and go; the search is eternal."

They took their morning meal in silence; all appeared much occupied with their own thoughts. They decided not to leave there till late in the day as the path through the stony valley was very hot.

Later in the morning, Nallathan, sitting alone in the shady porch of a ruined temple, heard at a little distance the sound of music, and at first was frightened by it, for it came from the mysterious cave of the Naga King. But the day was bright around him, he was wide awake now, and the mystery and fear of his dream were alike unreal to him. So at last he went to the cave, treading, indeed, a little softly.

Subhadra and Kamini were there, and it was their music he had heard; Subhadra playing on her yal, Kamini on the small hand-drum. Murugayi was standing at a little distance, leaning against one of the pillars, her wild locks falling loosely about her face, a secret smile upon her lips, her restless hands twisting the red cords upon her wrists. Near her Kothaman sat upon the stony floor, his hands clasping his knees, his gentle, simple gaze fixed upon Chilambi who was dancing. She danced with an intentness, a passionate earnestness, so that it seemed almost as if she were trying to dance back to life those still figures on the wall. She took no notice of him now, her eyes sought only the face of the Nagaraja, as if in some appeal. Subhadra and Kamini were intent only on their music, their rising tempo keeping pace with the increasing fervor of Chilambi's dance.

Suddenly a sort of anger seized him, a blind resentment, a fierce rejection of something he could not define. It rose up in his heart in fury, and he trembled where he stood. Then he turned away, and stumbled back to the porch where he had been sitting, and flung himself down there moodily, picking up the small stones and flinging them into the valley, in fruitless anger. Then there was a light step and Chilambi came softly and sat down by him without speaking. He stopped throwing the stones, but turned away his head, taking no notice of her. Still she did not speak, but when at last he stole a glance at her, she was looking at him, the same silent question in her eyes, the same mute reproach.

But he would not answer her, only shrugged his shoulders impatiently, pretending not to understand her, wishing she would go away. She waited for a while, as if expecting him to speak, then she sighed a little and left him.

He looked after her, his unreasoning anger still unabated. Why did she look at him like that, what did she want of him, that she followed him into his very dreams? But he could not answer himself.

And now there came a quicker step, and Murugayi was there, looking down upon him, she bent toward him speaking in a harsh whisper. "I have found it out," she said. "I have found out about her, Chilambi, but I will not tell you." And she shook her head, while her wild eyes gleamed, "Oh, no —, I will not tell you. You must find it all out for yourself." And she went quickly away.

Before they left the caves they made yet one more addition to their party. As they were making their way again down the thorny entrance they heard a quick clanking of chains, and out of a nearby cave there came a Vairagi, a naked ascetic with wild eyes and unkempt hair, carrying the tongs and chain, the distinguishing mark of this type of sadhu. He must have been in the cave all the time, though he had given no sign of his presence. He saluted them grimly, and followed them down to the road, and walked on with them unspeaking. Only now and again he muttered to himself, or rattled the heavy tongs on their chain, angrily. At the next village they came to, he stood before one or two houses, rattling his tongs again, in a threatening way, while the people hastened to bring him food, milk and fruit and uncooked rice, for he would accept no food cooked by others. He made a little fire of dung-cakes in the yard of one of the houses, and prepared his own food, and then demanded a mat to sleep on, which he spread in the shelter of the wall and went to sleep.

He travelled on with them, though he scarcely made himself one of their company, always sitting a little apart from them and cooking his food separately. He sat rigidly in long meditations, and performed curious rituals, leaping into the air vigorously a great number of times, which he was constantly increasing, shouting “Hari-Hari,” in a voice which was more menacing than devout. He was continually washing himself, stopping at all the tanks and streams, and then hurrying after them, grumbling that they had not waited for him.

Only once, when Chilambi danced in a woodland glade lit by the rising moon, and Subhadra and Kamini played an accompaniment on their instruments, did the Vairagi approach them, glowering, and sat for a while watching her. At the end he gave a sort of grunt and said, ‘It is all very well — but can one dance one’s way into heaven?”

“Perhaps,” Tiruvan answered him gravely, “one can.”

The Vairagi grinned, showing all his teeth, and looked from one to the other with his small bright, shifting eyes. They came to rest at last on Nallathan, who in spite of himself gave a shudder of repulsion. This rather pleased the Vairagi, and after that sometimes he came and sat beside him, or walked with him upon the long road.

“You felt my power,” he explained. “That is why you shuddered. It is good. It means you are tuned to my note. I could teach you a great deal, if you would leave these people and come with me. I could make you famous — a big sadhu that everyone would come to.”

“I am vowed to my master,” Nallathan answered simply. “I could not leave him if I would.”

“Yes — you could not leave him — or the dancing-girl either perhaps," the Vairagi sneered. And after that he walked no more with him.

Always when they came to a village, the Vairagi was the first who received alms, for the villagers responded more quickly to his threatening gestures than to Tiruvan's songs, or Chilambi's grace or Kothaman's gentleness.

Shanti and her brother feared him particularly, and when he heard of Shanti's crime he demanded loudly that she be driven away from them. It was not fitting that she should travel in company with so holy a person as himself. But as Tiruvan paid no attention to him, he contented himself by spitting at her when she passed, or holding out his hand, with the fingers crossed, to ward off the evil of her presence.

He would fly into furious rages when any one thwarted him in any way, or failed to pay him the reverence he considered his due. Once in a village street a small child, a little boy, not more than two years old, crawled across his path. In an instant he bent, seized the child with his tongs and hurled him toward the door of the house where his mother was standing. She screamed and snatched the child, who was injured and bleeding, and rushed into the house. There were other people standing about, but no one protested, or thought of resenting the deed. Only some dark looks were cast toward the house of the unfortunate family, who might have brought ill luck upon the village by rousing the Vairagi's wrath.

But Kothaman stood dumbfounded and later stole back to the house, and came out again to reassure them. "The child is not badly hurt," he said. "He has only some small cuts and bruises, and is very much frightened. I gave him a bit of sugarcane, and he is better now."

They were now nearing Brindaban, and here, to their relief, the Vairagi left them, going on to an ashram at Muttra, where there were others of his sect.

They came to Brindaban through waving fields of sugarcane, in the mildness of the evening light, and lit their fire by the shores of Jamuna under the great pale stars.

They sat there till late into the night, enjoying the coolness of the air after the heat of the day, and Tiruvan sang to them, accompanying himself on his yal, one of the Gopi songs.

"There was moonlight in the glade of the woodland,
And on the pallid rocks of the stream,
And down through the light and the shadow
Came his figure, who played upon a flute.
The sweet wild notes were like birds that sought their nest,
From afar I heard it, yet there was no sound,
For the song was in my heart and in his.

And I cried out in my soul to him,
"Lord Krishna, my life is waiting,
Make known to me the meaning of thy song."
And he answered: "Not for the sad I come,
Not for those who sit in darkness,
Putting life far from them.
I come for the joyful, for the out-stretched hand,
For those who taste love's savour and find it sweet;
Though their joy may be hid from them in many-veiled sorrow.

Awake, O sleeping joy, in the heart of my beloved.
Awake, O weary eyes, whose sorrow could not
dim their secret vision,
Rise up, O waiting soul, for on my lips is the
answer
And on my heart thy resting-place."
And to him my soul replied,
"O kiss me with thy lips of beauty,
My heart's vision, my beloved.
For desire in my soul has arisen
And cast aside its woeful bands.
The longing of my heart takes form
And comes to greet me.
Oh, beautiful his feet upon the mountains
And beautiful his tender hands of song.
His eyes are like raindrops on a drooping flower.
His body is a silver reed
That sways in the night-wind;
In his laughter all life is made clear."

Though the moonlit glade is left desolate
And the stream is lonely
And the night without sound,
Yet I know the beauty at its heart,
I have seen its divinity.

Though the heavens roll up as a scroll
And the earth falls away like a garment,
Though the stars are shaken from heaven
As a tree shakes its withered leaves,
Yet laughing from the midst of chaos
Shall come the happy-hearted God,
Singing his immortal song
That shall call new worlds up

From the depth of nothing,
That shall make a new earth
For the feet of the beloved,
A new heaven for a mantle."

They stayed for some time at Brindaban and then went on to Hardwar at the foot of the hills.

11

KANYA KUMARI

Time — The Present

As the hot season advanced the hillsides about the ashram were dry and pale and shining under wide pale skies. The veils of heat thickened over the mountains which withdrew austerely behind them, as into some last sanctuary, and were seen no more. The scattered villages were no longer visible except for the flash of the sun on their slate roofs. After a still morning the hot winds blew in from the plains about noonday, and later the thunder broke and went on grumbling among the hills. Sometimes the winds brought with them violent dust-storms, with yellow sand blown up all the way from Rajasthan, casting a lurid, sulphurous light upon earth and sky. The dead pine-needles fell, changing the colour of the hills, making them all tawny and golden, or after a shower, quite red. Above them the fresh needles were already showing in little puffs of smoky green.

Except at midday it was not too hot to be out, and I liked to walk along the shadier hill-paths or sit beneath a pine tree on some bare knoll, just looking about me. Amiel says a landscape is a state of the soul. "And here," I thought, "the soul is wide and swept and sun-smitten, and the road over the mountain leads toward Kailas."

A mile or so from the ashram a bold hill struck out between two valleys, and on its highest point was a small white temple, just a dot among the trees. I determined, one day, to climb up to it. Just below a rocky cliff-face I came upon a small cave-shrine, then scrambling up the tall rocks I reached the higher temple, a single cell with a small porch and a gilded spire. Not far off was a small stone cabin where an anchoress lived, a little bent, withered old woman, slightly humped-back, wearing the gerua, the ochre robe of the Sannyasini, and an enormous turban of ochre cloth wound about her head. Her name was Karuna Ma.

She was quite friendly and came hobbling and smiling to meet me, asking for alms. We sat down together on the bare ground, slippery with the pine-needles, and I asked her about the temple. It was called Kashaya Devi, corrupted by the local dialect into Kashar Devi. It meant the "Tawny Goddess" and it was old, very old. It was in fact mentioned in the Puranas. "On a high point between the two rivers is the House of the Tawny Goddess." She pointed out to me the two rivers flowing in the two valleys at the foot of the slope.

"And who," I asked, "is the Tawny Goddess?" She hesitated a moment, then replied, nodding her head sagely, "They say it is Parvati who came here wearing the ochre robe in the time of her tapasya, of her great austerities to win the love of Lord Shiva." She said that some people gave it another meaning. "But what does it matter? The divine has many names and many forms."

She told me she usually stayed here, in the little cabin, for some months of the year. She was given the temple key, that she might go there and pray at all times of the day or night, and she washed the temple floor and kept everything neat and clean.

"And now," she said, "I must leave you. It is time for my japam." She took out her long rosary of rudraksha beads, and hobbled off already muttering the sacred words of her mantram as the beads slipped through her fingers.

The mantram is the sacred text given to all disciples by their guru at the time of their initiation. The repetition of it a number of times in the day, sometimes many thousands, is the japam, the devotional exercise in which the sadhus spend a great deal of their time.

I asked my friend Madhav at the ashram about Parvati. "Did she only become a Goddess after her marriage with Lord Shiva?"

"No," he said. "She is Shakti, the Power of the Lord, the female power. She is divine and eternal, but she does not always know herself as such. She was born in the world as Sati, the daughter of King Daksha, and at the Swayamvara she chose Shiva for her lord, in the form of a naked ascetic. She gave up her body for him, and was born again as Parvati, the daughter of Himalaya."

The rains came down upon us with a swoop, ending the hot weather, and almost overnight the hills turned from their tawny gold to a deep, uniform green. Day after day the rain fell, and the mists boiled up from the valley as from a giant cauldron, and crept insidiously about the ridge on which the ashram stood, or rolled slowly down the long slopes, like a ghostly lava. The trees dripped and the water poured profusely from the gutters of the roofs. Everything one touched felt sodden with damp.

Many of the roads and paths were blocked with landslips, and it became rather unsafe to walk in many places, which made the time more tedious. But the rainfall was not as heavy here as in other regions of the hills, and we had bright spells now and then, and a little pale sunshine at some time in the day. And rainbows arched above us, often in a double arc stretching from hill to hill. Once or twice the long clouds parted and for a moment we could see the snows, which after all had not left us, but were there all the time, invisibly above us, in their hidden and inscrutable deity.

Then with the autumn the rains receded, slowly, lessening a little each day, and the mandua crop, a rough grain of some sort, perhaps a kind of buckwheat, was ripening, and showed green-gold, in the darker green of the hills. The sun shone wanly on some days, on others the sky was dull and sad-coloured, a grey haze in the air, and a grey long wind with a dim sound of thunder that never came nearer. It was very melancholy.

In the middle of September was a fire-ritual called the Khatarva, or "Warding-off Ritual", to ward off evil from the homestead, particularly from the cattle. There were bonfires flaring in the dusk on all the hills, and we too lit our fire on the slope above the ashram and carried burning censers down to the cowsheds and censed the perplexed cows. Sometimes demons are burnt in effigy, and everyone must shout and make as much noise as he can; which is very much liked by the children.

Then at last came the clear cold, and the great snows returned to us forgivingly, seeming to be nearer than before.

The ashram made ready for the Kumari Puja, the Maiden Festival, when a little girl is brought from the village and worshipped in the temple as the incarnation of the Goddess — and again it was useless to ask, what Goddess? For in her all the Goddesses are one. She is Kanya Kumari, the immortal maiden, the eternally young.

The little girl, about seven or eight years old, bore herself with great dignity, sitting motionless for several hours on a low throne at one side of the altar, where the puja was made to her instead of to the image. She was dressed in a simple cloth, with a diadem of flowers, and ritual marks were made upon her forehead with crimson paste. She seemed to lose her childlike look as the puja went on, her eyes growing large and still, her face pale as a mask. Perhaps it was just weariness, but it appeared more like a divine majesty which had entered into her, so that it was not at all strange to see the sadhus, even Swami Asokananda himself, kneeling before her, their faces bowed to the earth.

I aked Madhav about her afterwards; if the same child was chosen more than once, so that she grew accustomed to the ceremony? But he said a different girl was taken every year. "The forms change," he said. "The Goddess is eternal."

I had often at the ashram the sense of a great deal more going on around me than was visible to the naked eye, of some other world that impinged on our world; and the barriers at times were very thin indeed. Then the gates closed down again opaguely between us. Which was perhaps as well, for that other world was not wholly divine, and when it lay open to us things which were very evil sometimes slipped through.

We had many pilgrims of all sorts, going or coming from Kailas. Ours was not the main pilgrim route, but joined it farther on, somewhere by Askote. They came sometimes singly, sometimes in groups large or small, sometimes sodden with drink or ecstatic with drugs, fanatic, fasting, shouting or silent, some old, some young, some rich, some poor, but all trudging on foot over the difficult route.

One evening a young boy came, not more than twelve, or thirteen perhaps, a sturdy little chap, with his grandmother who was obviously dying. She had reached Kailas but had broken down on the return journey. She was small and shrivelled and the child had both arms clasped about her, almost carrying her. There was something very touching and pitiful about them, and in the tenderness and passionate concern in the boy's face. We did what we could for the old woman, but she died next day. Her body was carried down to the burning-ghat by the river, and the child went on his way alone.

Another man stopped for several days on his way to Askote, a little quiet man of middle age, very slight in build, with an old piece of white canvas, which looked as if it might once have been part of a tent, wrapped round him for a cloak. There was something curiously unreal about him. He had a vague, detached look in his eyes, which might have been caused by drugs or by some mental derangement, but I thought myself, he had gone just a little too far into that other world and could not quite get back. His voice when he spoke was very low and gentle, with a strange. far-off sound, as if it came from a long distance, and he had an odd habit of, as it seemed, appearing and disappearing at will. At least I often looked up and found him sitting close to me on the terrace, where a moment before I had not seen anyone, or been conscious of any one coming. I doubt if he really came and went, or moved at all at such times; it was more as if he just withdrew himself from one's perception, perhaps into that other world, so close and yet so far from our world.

"One seeks the truth," he said to me suddenly one day, "but it is not of this world." And then he went away.

"Perhaps," I thought, "the truth of this world lies in that other, but who shall find it out? Does the way to it lie through this world, on the hard road to Kailas? And Kailas itself, which world does it lie in? It is indeed an actual mountain, one can find it even on our maps, one can go there even on foot. But did it exist also in that other world? Did another more perilous road lead to it, some way of the spirit, following the earthly track, yet differing from it subtly. And beyond Kailas was Mount Meru, the home of the Gods, and beyond Meru is the White Island, most mysterious of all, in some unknown sea, farther than all the world, at the back of the north wind. Is the road to it that "wondrous road" that Pindar speaks of, the road to the Hyperboreans?"

"Neither by ship nor on foot canst thou find it."

Again I turned to my friend, Madhav, to find out about the White Island.

It lay, he said, to the north of the great ocean, "The Milky Sea." Once, the great Rishis had gone there at the command of the Lord, and the Island was filled with His presence, but the light from it was so great that they were blinded and could see nothing. They did penance for a hundred years and practised great austerities and then they could see a little, the forms of the White Beings, glorious and perfect, bright as ten thousand suns. Then they knew the White Island was the source of all the light in the world. They could hear the divine praises being sung, and worship offered, but their eyes could not pierce the intense light of the Lord. Then they heard a bodiless voice saying; 'Believe you have seen the Lord himself in the sight of the White Beings. And now go back whence you came. You have still much to undergo before your eyes are prepared for the vision of the Lord.'

"And if even the great Rishis could not see Him," concluded Madhav with a sigh, "how can we hope to do so?"

There was a woman, not a pilgrim but a devotee of sorts, who came sometimes to the ashram from a small hill-town some distance off. She was an educated woman, not a peasant, and held in fact a degree from one of the Indian universities. I did not notice her very much, at first, except that she was rather repulsive looking, flabby and dishevelled, with lank, greasy hair and not very clean clothes. Everyone rather avoided her, but she came from time to time with gifts and sat in the temple porch, heavily waiting. She grew all the time more degenerate looking, gross and repellent. Then some one whispered to me, fearfully, that she had nightly intercourse with a devil. It may have been true. Certainly one could see her rapid disintegration as a human being. But she continued to come to the temple, and sit there, ponderously, in the porch, looking about her with a sly, leering, vacant smile.

One night, as I lay half awake on my plank bed, "but whether in the body, or out of the body I cannot tell", there appeared suspended in the air before me a white flower, with four opened petals, rather like a Tudor rose. As I watched, one of the petals rolled itself up and someone looked through, a man with a fair, golden skin, well-cut features, and long, silken black hair and a short beard. He was just sitting there, looking out, as one might roll up the blind and look out a window. He observed me calmly, without surprise, yet attentively. Then the whole thing was gone. It had lasted only a few seconds, but it was of extraordinary vividness, so that I easily recognised the man when he came some time later to the ashram. He was, I was told, of great holiness, and was head of an ashram farther on the road to Kailas, much farther, almost on the border between India and Tibet. He was tall and well made, very gracious in his manner, and spoke excellent English. I had only a few moments talk with him. He asked me how long I had been at the ashram, and he looked much puzzled when I said I had come in the spring. "I have not been here since last year," he said, "yet I think I have seen you before." If he had remained longer I might have told him about the flower, but we were interrupted then, and he left the next day. He took my hands in his, at parting, a thing very unusual here, and I felt a strange elation from his touch which lasted all day.

Then one day at dusk, Miles Barnes came, and Tulasi Devi, making their way wearily down the steep path to the ashram.

They had come from the temple at Kedarnath, a place of pilgrimage high in the snows, the last peak we could see to the west of us, opposite the Kailas route.

Miles looked older than when I had seen him, very sunburnt and weatherworn. He had put off his western clothes entirely, and wore a loose gerua tunic, reaching to his calves, a cotton shawl folded over his shoulder, and rope-soled sandals. He carried a tall pilgrim staff, and had a long rosary of very large beads hung about his neck.

He was very footsore and fatigued, and for several days he just lay in his room, which was next to mine, in a stupor of exhaustion, while one of the Brahmacharis bathed and massaged his feet and bound them up with ointment and clean cotton.

Tulasi Devi had a room in another building, close to the temple. She too looked older, but her spare frame seemed capable of any exertion, without effort and without fatigue. Their journey which had brought Miles to the point of collapse, had scarcely drawn a circle of weariness about her deep quiet eyes. There was, as I had noticed before, something a little stern in her face, and much of sadness, but it was very tranquil and very resolute, as of one not to be turned aside from any purpose.

She moved with a still grace very beautiful to see. She was an educated woman and spoke English with a very sweet intonation. But she spoke very little; she was almost as silent as the sadhu who had brought me here, Swami Atulananda. For most of the day they sat, both of them, in the quiet little temple, motionless, rapt in contemplation.

When Miles recovered from his tiredness, and his feet were healed, we walked about a good deal together on the neighbouring hillsides. But he was never at ease unless he knew exactly where was Tulasi Devi. Before leaving the ashram he would go to the temple to be sure she was there, and the first thing he did on our return was to go again to the door and look in to satisfy himself that she was not gone.

"I told you she would find you again when she wanted to," I reminded him one day.

"Yes," he answered, his brow wrinkled with anxiety, "but suppose she doesn't want to!"

He appeared much perturbed about it and kept repeating, "I must hold on to her always. I mustn't let her go."

He told me they would spend the winter at the ashram, and in the spring when the road was open again they would go to Kailas, and to Manasarovar, the sacred lake beyond it.

I asked him if he had ever heard of the White Island. He shook his head. "But she will know all about it. She will know how to get there if she wants to go." His deep trust in her was very simple and moving.

The weather was now at its finest, with cool, fair days. The bird-cherry trees were blossoming in showers of pink jade, but looking somehow incongruous in the autumn landscape, which was again very tawny and golden. When one looked at them one began to have spring feelings, which got mixed up with autumn feelings and left one very confused in spirit. The trees hummed with bees in a steady vibration, and the little purple sun-birds came with their long, curved beaks to sip the nectar. There were innumerable butterflies, larger than the sun-birds, with drooping swallowtail wings, and others with wings of transparent blue, infused with red, and marked with heavy black veins, which made them look like bits of stained glass windows floating about in the sunlight.

There were flocks of tits and finches and dark blue thrushes, and the large Himalayan magpie, surely the handsomest bird in the world, pale blue heavily barred with black, with touches of white, and a long pheasant's tail, orange legs and bill, and a black head with one little white curl on top of it.

There were troops of parrots, with long yellow-fringed tails. They would shoot over our heads like a flight of arrows, then on an instant, with a single movement of the whole flock, turn, and shoot back again. Sometimes we saw a griffon, the huge Himalayan vulture, fold its enormous wings and come to rest on the top of a tall pine.

The little deodar catkins were so full of pollen that if we pressed them with our fingers it spirted out in yellow whiffs. When the wind shook the branches it bore off a cloud of yellow smoke, and all the roofs were stained with it, and the water in the rain-barrels was like thin mustard.

Men were ploughing up the fields, and in some the grain was already springing, a faint wash of green upon the grey terraces. Sheaves of hay were bound in the crotches of the pine trees, where they were kept dry, high above the ground, and had some shelter from the rain. Great golden pumpkins were laid in a row along the grey roof-ridges, and red chillies were drying there in the sun, and cow-dung balls for the winter fire.

At every sunset there was the moving pageant of the snows. From their shining whiteness against the sky's clarid blue, they burned suddenly a fiery rose against a faint coppery-crimson sky. The colour moved along the range from the east, and a shadow crept along, following it. The peaks were suddenly a dead ash-white, against a dim band of powdery blue — the symbol of the blue throat of Shiva— with another coppery band above it, lifting higher as the shadow increased. On the full-moon night we walked to a point farther along the ridge, looking eastward to the moon-rise. The snows had still a smouldering bloom of colour, and the lower, rocky ranges were a burnished crimson, and from behind, from some unimaginable depth, the moon was blown up softly like a bubble, sulphur yellow, against the burnt-out coppery rose.

We stayed so long, held by that enchantment of colour, that it was quite dark when we turned to find our way back. The road was silent, deserted, for the village people were very reluctant to be out after dark. There were, according to them, two particularly unpleasant demons haunting that part of the country after nightfall. One of them, old and gross and paunchy, is carried in a litter by a rabble of strange creatures, half beasts, half men, noisy and malicious. The other, more sinister, rides alone with a great boulder for a horse. He lures women to him by the sound of a flute, and carries them off upon his horrifying steed. One can hear him sometimes, they said, stumping along the stony paths, or through thick jungle where no real horse could go. But Miles and I saw nothing more dangerous than a jackal slipping across our path like a shadow soundlessly.

The weather now became colder and I needed wood for my fire. Two trees were felled for me and cut up, and then women from the village came in a long file, each one bearing a log of wood upon her head. They went back and forth with easy, graceful stride, their full skirts swinging, until all the wood was piled below my room. The Swamis and Brahmacharis did not feel the cold and no fire was ever kindled for them. Only sometimes a small charcoal brazier was brought to the hall when they came for their food. But my fire blazed every evening, and often in the day as well, if it was cloudy. Miles frequently joined me there, for he also was glad of the warmth and we made hot tea, or roasted chestnuts, for there were a few chestnut and walnut trees among the fruit trees in the orchard.

He came in one day for his midday meal, when Madhav was with me, and I saw him looking very hard at my image of the Ardhanarishwara.

"What is it?" he asked.

Madhav answered for me. "It is the Lord as man and woman." And he quoted from the scriptures: "And He, the Lord, took a form, and that was a divided form, half woman and half man."

Miles stood leaning against the window in silence, looking out, on the long slopes where the light-footed village women were cutting grass, and along a narrow path cut out of the hillside a goatherd came from the Tibetan side, leading his shaggy goats whose tiny hooves rustled drily in the dead bracken. "The Lord as man and woman," he repeated at last, half to himself, and he added strangely a verse from our own scriptures: "Reconciling the world unto Himself."

I recognised the quotation from St. Paul, "As God was in Christ Jesus, reconciling the world unto Himself," but I was perplexed at the rather surprising way in which Miles had used the words. That night I heard him cry out, a shrill terrifying cry. I ran to his room with my torch, and found him on the floor, half crouching by his bed. I could see his colourless face, white to the lips, and though his flesh was cold to the touch, the drops of sweat stood out on his forehead. His haunted eyes gazed at me, but I knew he did not see me. He seemed lost in some dream from which I could not rouse him. I was about to run down to Tulasi Devi for help, for I was much frightened, when I saw the consciousness gradually centring itself in his eyes. He put out a shaking hand to touch me, as if to reassure himself. At last he said, his voice trembling, still bewildered, "I must have been dreaming. I thought I was walking by the sea and it was night. It was the night of the Lord. And She came, dancing on the waves, with a dark flower in her hand. She wanted to give it to me, but I could not take it." He shivered again with cold or fear, and covered his face with his hand, whispering desperately. "It's too much, too much. Who could bear it?" Again he looked up at me, blankly staring: "Though I say to the darkness, cover me, even the night shall be light about me."

But he grew calmer, and I left him. The next morning he seemed to remember nothing of it, and was much as usual, only a little pale.

We had a few snowflurries at Christmas time, and on New Year's Day there was a heavy fall, covering all the valley, so that all the ground was white from the ashram to the summit of Nanda Devi.

In the evening there was moonlight, shining luridly behind massed clouds. We left our fire and went up together, plodding through the snow which was ankle deep to the saddle of the ridge, curious to observe the unusual effects in the landscape. The great swords of the cactus leaves held each a heavy line of white, several inches high, and all the trees were weighted down, and in many places the branches had crashed. All the outlines of the trees were altered. We came to an avenue of tall deodars, facing each other across the road, in what seemed like full, flounced skirts and tall, conical head-dresses, bowing to each other ponderously, as in some masque of giantesses.

But in a few days all the snow had gone, though the weather was still cold. Very often, in the early morning, the valley was filled with a level mist, coming almost to the terrace of the ashram, so that we seemed to stand upon the shore of the sea, a promontory instead of a mountain-top. Sometimes the mist rose higher and enveloped us in its blank whiteness, though if we climbed a little, to the slopes of Kashar Devi, we found the sun shining in a cloudless sky, and the snow peaks soaring up on wide white wings, like released spirits.

Then Shiva Ratri came and the spring began, and then one night Tulasi Devi danced. She danced in the temple after the evening puja, after the hymns were sung, while the lights still burned upon the altar and the air was heavy with incense and the offering of the first spring flowers. Two of the Brahmacharis beat out an accompaniment for her, one on a drum, the other with a small pair of copper cymbals not much larger than a half-crown piece.

It was for Miles she danced, strangely, circling round him, weaving a spell he was powerless to break, a dance of revelation, of high ecstasy, a summons, an entreaty.

As she danced the years fell away from her like petals, her face grew young as a girl's, tender, unlined, her lips serene, half smiling, her eyes shining softly, with that curious appearance of being lit from within. In the rapture of her dance, in the perfect joy of her movement, she was ageless, bodiless, unwearied, she was the Immortal Maiden, unchanging, undying — she was Kanya Kumari, the Goddess herself, in her timeless beauty.

Yet still, wonderfully, herself, she had come, not aloof in unapproachable deity, but gently human, a woman, a girl dancing down through the ages to meet him again, the girl of the paintings at Ajanta.

And we, we watched her wondering, a little afraid, as if our eyes were unworthy even to behold her.

I glanced anxiously at Miles. He was almost in agony; the sweat glistened on his forehead, his lips were tense, pallid, his eyes dark with anguish, his body rigid, I thought he struggled to move as one does sometimes, half-awakened from sleep, yet paralysed still, the body not answering, the nerves refusing to respond, the mind still without mastery. And half-awakened thus, it seemed he strove to recover some forgotten dream, to link anew some broken remembrance of the past, to redeem some ancient loss. I think he might have died there at her feet, had she not stopped, and turned to him softly, releasing him from whatever power it was that held him there, shedding the light of her countenance upon him, in forgiveness, in consummation, in the perfection of understanding. And I saw their eyes meet in an instant of recognition, in a blessedness beyond the world.

12

THE HOUSE OF THE TAWNY GODDESS

Time — The Past

Hardwar was filled with people for it was the time of the great festival, the Kumbha Mela. Among the crowds it was difficult to find lodging, but Tiruvan led his little company beyond the town in the direction of Rishikesh where on the banks of the sacred river were numbers of little stone huts, built for the use of sannyasins and other devotees who might wish to live there singly and in seclusion. Here they settled themselves, and went into the town to receive their food which was distributed freely to all who asked by various charitable houses.

The weather was hot and the flies numerous. Sickness soon broke out among the thronging pilgrims and among them Subhadra was stricken. The others would have gone on to the more wholesome air of the hills, but they could not leave Kamini alone in her distress. Only Kashinath and his sister made haste away; joining another group of pilgrims who were leaving for Kailas, for they were afraid, Kashinath said, that Shanti might die of the sickness with her crime unexpiated.

The rest stayed in one of the little huts by the river, in another of which the sick woman lay. Chilambi and Murugayi helped Kamini with the nursing; but in spite of all their care, after a few days, Subhadra died.

They built a funeral-pyre for her before sunset by the river bank, and through the night they watched there, beneath the high stars. Her body was anointed with the richest oils which Kamini had begged in the town, and with camphor and sandal. On her forehead and breast they put a special paste which burned whitely in the midst of the redder flames, and was like a spirit ascending, mystically, beautifully, set free from all grosser substance. The night was very still and the sound of the great river flowing by was a monotone of grief, as if it received all sorrow in its patient depth, and bore it forth on those resistless waters, like the flow of time bearing all away, or the river of life set endlessly toward death. Kamini neither wept nor spoke a word, only she stretched her body on the hard, cold sand and lay there unmoving till the fire had burnt to ashes.

For days thereafter she lay in the hut, seemingly numbed by the shock, half unconscious. And still she did not speak nor weep, only she moaned a little now and then. Murugayi and Chilambi watched by her in turn, and Tiruvan sometimes came to the door and looked at her thoughtfully, and Kothaman wept for her without restraint.

"She will not die," Murugayi said, "for her love is stronger than her grief."

After some days she came gradually to herself, and got up quietly, and bathed in the river and washed her garments. Her shyness was gone and her air was resolute and confident. She said she would go no further with them; she would stay here where Subhadra had died. She made a small altar in the hut and set Subhadra's ashes upon it in a sealed jar which she decorated with garlands, and kept a small lamp burning before it.

"Do you go now to Kailas," she said. "I will stay here while I live. Only do you pray for me sometimes that I may be faithful unto death."

So they set out on the path that led up into the hills. Only five of them now!

Chilambi went lightly up the steep and narrow ways. She became lighter-hearted the deeper they went into the hills. Sometimes she sang, sometimes she gathered wild mallows and rhododendrons to make them into garlands for Tiruvan.

Murugayi went steadily, purposefully, her eyes far ahead as if fixed on a distant goal. Tiruvan went easily as always, in spite of his lameness, unhasting, unwearied. Kothaman went quietly as he did everything else, but sometimes when he saw Nallathan toiling up the steeper slopes, he would say to him, "Let me carry the yal."

They followed the intricate paths, threading the ridges, the long slopes, the valleys. They stayed to rest a day or two, here and there, in some temple or dharamshala, then went on. But they came one day to a place on a low headland at a meeting of two streams, where there was an old temple and some half-ruined buildings. Here they stopped, for the rains were now heavy.

Nallathan was filled with a strange elation, perhaps because of the unaccustomed height. At times he felt himself almost outside of his body, filled with inward laughter at the heaviness and weariness of the flesh. Then suddenly it had all burnt itself out, leaving him only the grey ashes of despair. He turned in sullen withdrawal from his companions, slipping away from them in increasing loneliness, a darkening solitude and denial that closed round him, cutting him off from them. In a dulness of heart, that was not pride but the revulsion of despair, he regarded them with a cold and awful clarity. Chilambi was only a low-caste dancing-girl, Tiruvan a strolling singer and nothing more, Kothaman the rather stupid boy who could not learn the Vedas. And Murugayi, was she not mad, a distraught and frantic woman?

Plunged in this despair from which, by its very nature, he could not seek their help, he shrank from them more and more, seeking to be alone, sitting by himself in the temple or by the stream, avoiding all their ways.

They watched him, as if ashamed before him, not daring to offer him their consolation, as if somehow in this very need they had failed him. Once Chilambi came softly and danced in the temple when he was there, earnestly, timidly, imploring with every movement some divine help in their extremity. But he only remembered the Vairagi's question: "Can one dance one's way into heaven?" Another time she brought a handful of wild lilies, and placed them gently on the altar, and Tiruvan, who had followed her with his yal, sat down not far from Nallathan, facing the altar, and sang as if offering for him the prayer he could not make for himself.

"Here, O my Lord, I bring thee fading blossoms,
The life that passes and is yet so fair,
And know that held in thy eternal Being
The immortal spirit yet shall find them there.

Made one, made fairer, in thy enduring vision,
The things thou keepest, Lord, they cannot die,
So in my hands to thy including mercy
I bring this fruitless blossom that is I.

In thy All knowing, where all things that perish
To our false seeming live unlost in Thee,
Hold them, O Lord, within thy timeless present,
The thing that hath been — or that could not be."

But Nallathan rose sullenly and went away, wandering up the bank, of the stream, and did not return till it was dark. There was a light burning in the temple, and creeping to the window he looked in. Murugayi was there, dancing one of her wild dances, her face frantic with supplication, and Kothaman, with tears rolling down his cheeks, was beating time for her on the drum.

He went to his cell and waited there until the light in the temple went out, and all was still. Then he put his single blanket over his shoulder, and took his lota, his small copper waterpot, in his hand, and went out, latching the door behind him. He forded the stream and chose a steep path leading up abruptly through thick jungle towards the higher ridges. He climbed steadily, without a backward glance, and when he reached level ground he began to run. There was moonlight and he could see the path, and though he stumbled several times, and fell, he rose again and kept on running. When morning came he was far away.

He went on in this way for several days, sleeping in the daytime under some jungle tree, entering the villages only at dusk to beg a little food, one or two chapatis, some beans, a little curd; then walked again throughout the night. When the moon waned and he could no longer see his way through the rough mountain paths, he was so far that he thought it safe now to walk in the day-time. There was no longer any danger that any one could follow his trail. And it was necessary also to seek shelter at night from the wild beasts with which these higher hills abounded, black bears and leopards, and sometimes tigers which he could hear roaring at night in the warmer valleys which lay between the mountain ridges. When he came out into any open spot the high snows towered over him in their autumn brightness.

One evening, in the clear dusk, he climbed a high point, jutting out between two river valleys. There was a little temple at the top, a small Shiva temple with a single cell and a little porch, and on the porch he lay down to sleep.

In the night the wind rose, bringing a sudden storm with savage shrieks of thunder and jagged brilliant lightning. Again he saw the Maruts with their furious host, their leaping, screaming steeds, driving by him in the sky. And he heard their mocking laughter, raucous and pitiless as the thunder.

The rain was falling like arrows, lashing the hills, and the porch gave him little shelter. His blanket and clothing were soaked and cold, and clammy on his shrinking flesh. The lightning had stopped now, and the night was pitchy dark. Then all at once within the shrine a light began to shine, at first very dimly, then strengthening. He crept along on the floor to the arched doorway, and looking through the bars of the gate, he saw a man standing there in the likeness of an ascetic, his body smeared with ashes to a strange glistening whiteness, which shone in the darkness of the little temple as if lit from within. The man held a trident in his hand, and a serpent coiled about his arm. Though outwardly so strange and forbidding, there was a singular grace about him, and as he turned toward the door Nallathan could see his face, filled with so infinite a compassion that he felt the tears rolling down his own cheeks, for the very wonder of it. The man stepped to the gate, which swung open for him of its own accord, and went out into the storm and the falling rain. But the rain could not touch him; it fell back harmlessly from the circle of light in which he moved. Nallathan watched him, trembling, filled with a passionate desire to follow him, not to be left again in the night and the darkness and his terrible aloneness. Yet he could not. For the man did not walk upon the earth but through the opening air as if a path were laid there for his feet alone. He crossed the wide valley as on a delicate bridge, a single film of mist, and on the other side it seemed the heavens themselves opened to receive him. There was a single flash, which may have been lightning, covering the sky from the east even to the west, and then darkness, and the man was gone.

Nallathan was left alone in such a bitterness of desolation, such an utter, arid waste of aloneness, that his very flesh shrivelled with it and his heart was dried as an empty seed. He stumbled aimlessly from the temple, staggering among the jagged rocks and the sharp thorns, torn and tripped by the briars and trailing undergrowth of the jungle hillside, wandering up and down in the night without hope of any aid.

Then he saw just before him, between two great deodars, a little stone cabin, scarcely high enough for a man to stand unright in. Through the chink of the door there came a faint gleam of light. Faint with anguish, drenched with the rain, torn and bleeding from the briars, he reached the door and knocked feebly, once, twice.

At first there was no response, then he heard a slight movement within, then slowly the door opened just a little, a very little, and a woman stood there looking at him, holding a small lamp which she sheltered with one hand from the wind, throwing its light upon her face.

It was the oldest face he had ever seen, hollowed and shrivelled, and yet the most beautiful. Her eyes had a vastness of suffering which could only have gathered there in the passing of a thousand ages, from the very beginning of time. Her voice, when she spoke, was no more than a harsh, dry whisper, yet it fell upon his heart with a loveliness unfathomable.

"Who are you," she whispered, "who knock at my door—where no one knocks—where no one has drawn nigh in the long course of the years? Go your ways. I wait for One alone. I wait till the world's end, and new worlds shall be created for me that I may wait in them again, for One, for One alone."

She peered out at Nallathan's thin, drenched figure, at the blood stains on his flesh, at the little silver moon still clasped in his dark hair. On this last her gaze was fastened, then she shook her head.

"You bear the moon on your forehead, and the water flows from your hair. Yet you are not He. When He comes I shall know his face. Go then, go your ways. Leave me. I cannot open to you. I wait for One alone."

The door closed against him, left him standing there pitifully, cold in the night, shivering and alone. His strength failing, he turned away, stumbling on again faintly in the darkness.

He found again at last the Shiva temple, all in darkness, and crouched there miserably. Now the storm had subsided, the winds were still, but the darkness was only the more intense. Then athwart the darkness there came a single ray of light. It seemed to follow the path on which the man had gone, mystically, across the valley, a single path leading through the darkness, piercing its very heart. And in the light, he saw Chilambi dancing, and behind her came Tiruvan singing with his yal. And the darkness received them and they were gone, taking the light with them. Only on the wind there seemed to come an echo of Tiruvan's song :

"May the sun pour down happiness
May day and night yield happiness
May the dust of the earth bring us happiness
May the heavens give us happiness."

And on him too the merciful darkness descended and for a time he knew nothing more. He woke in the morning stiff with cold. The shrine was closed and dim, and at a little distance he saw the small stone house where he had knocked. It was quite close to the temple, but in the darkness he had circled all the hill untill he came to it. Again he went shivering to the door. It stood half open, creaking on a rusty hinge, and pushing it a little he looked in. It was empty, deserted, with a broken roof, a shutterless window. Far a long time, obviously, no one had lived there. Only a few dead leaves lay on the floor and stirred a little in the wind from the open door.

Again the sense of desolation overcame him. He was lost and alone, and all the light in the world had gone out for him.

Wearily he went back to the temple and picked up his sodden blanket and spread it in the sun to dry. The sun was very hot, and soon he was warm again and the blanket dry. He put it over his shoulder, then he picked up his water-pot and started off down the hill. There was only one thing for him to do. To go back to the temple at the waters'-meet where he had left his companions.

But the next day he was taken very ill from his exposure to the storm, and lay for many weeks in the house of a peasant, hovering between life and death. When he recovered he was very weak, but as soon as he felt himself strong enough to walk, he started off once more for the temple. But it was not as easy to find as it had been to leave. His sense of direction was confused, and it was only by going this way and that, inquiring from village to village, describing the place he wanted, that at last he found some one who could tell him where it lay. "Yes," a man said, "I know the place. It is several days journey from here. Take the path to the right and follow the stream, and you will come there." Which he did.

When he saw at last the temple and other small buildings on the point between the streams his heart stood still. There was no movement there, no sign of life. They lay, silent, seemingly deserted. Fearfully, with heavy steps he drew nearer, he crossed the stream, he reached the temple, and as he stood by its open door a dry sob shook him. He would have prayed, but he could not. He had lost them all, he stood alone.

Then suddenly a door opened and Kothaman stood there. He cried out in surprise when he saw Nallathan and called quickly to some one within, "He has come. He is here."

There was a sudden movement in the room, then Murugayi came also to the door and stood there beside Kothaman. They both stared at him as if he were something unreal.

Nallathan came toward them and sank down on the stone threshold, too weary to speak. At last he whispered, "Chilambi — Tiruvan?"

Kothaman shook his head gravely. "They are not here. They have gone away; I don't know where. When they found you were gone, they went away."

In despair Nallathan rose, as if to start off again at once, saying, "I must find them — I must find Chilambi."

But he fell down again for very weakness. Kothaman and Murugayi bent over him. Together they helped him into the room and made a bed for him, and Kothaman heated milk on the fire and made a thin porridge of wheatmeal, and fed him like a child.

For a few days he lay again very ill, as he had lain in the mountains, but this time he recovered more quickly and before long he could move about. Then the three of them consulted together as to what should be done.

"Which way did they go?" Nallathan asked. "Was it toward Kailas?" And he waited, terrified, for the answer.

"No," Kothaman answered, thoughtfully. "They turned back toward the plains. But Murugayi and I waited here for we thought you might come back."

"Then let us go to the plains. I must find Chilambi."

"But how will you find her now? How will you find her again out of all the people in the world. It would take a thousand years to find one person out of so many."

"Then I must begin at once."

Kothaman had begun to weep. "We shall die, all of us, before we find them. Our lives are too short for such a task."

Nallathan remembered the woman of the mountain. "Then there must be other lives, and other worlds, that we may seek them there."

"We shall be reborn, yes, but then how shall we recognise them, how shall we know one another?"

Murugayi leaned forward, eagerly. "There is the mark," she said, "there is the mark on the forehead. Did

I not see it on his brow as a child? The mark of the search !"

"It is not for every one to see."

"But it is there. And if it is not visible to one, it will be to another. Come, let us go."

So the next day the three of them set out, travelling back the long way they had come. Kothaman went sadly, yet gently as ever, trying to keep back the soft reproach in his eyes. Murugayi went sombre and brooding, her wild gaze subdued, bent upon the ground. But Nallathan, for all the burden of grief that weighed upon his heart, went not quite without hope.

13

TRIMURTI

Time — The Present

The spring was breaking again on the hills. The terraced fields about the ashram were a vivid green, and apricots and plum trees were blossoming. The little dead gold leaves were falling from the oak trees and new ones coming out in drooping pinky-grey tendrils at the ends of the branches, with small greenish catkins beneath them. And thousands of butterflies blew over in clouds from east to west, deep gold or pale blue-grey.

Sometimes at night one could hear the honk of the wild swans flying toward Manasarovar, and in my mind there echoed the lines of Kabir.

"The swan has taken its flight to the lake beyond the mountains; why should it seek the pools and ditches any more?"

The road to Kailas would soon be open, and Miles and Tulasi Devi began to speak of leaving us.

There was a new serenity in Miles. The wrinkles of anxiety had gone from his forehead, and though his thoughtfulness deepened there was a certain gaiety about him, in his smile, in his eyes, in his sudden unselfconscious laughter. But he walked less on the hills and sat more often silently with Tulasi Devi in the temple.

It seemed on that night when Tulasi Devi danced some link which was broken between them had been forged again.

Sometimes when we were walking together he would stop and take up a handful of dust and let it fall through his fingers slowly, wonderingly, as if it held for him a subtle revelation. Once when a snake crossed our path and disappeared into a hole of the earth, he stood gazing after it, amazedly, as if his mind followed it into some inner labyrinth, as if it, too, was the key to mystery.

Climbing up one morning alone to Kashar Devi, I saw him walking ahead of me. There was someone with him, a lame man with a garland of flowers about his neck and some old sort of lute slung across his back, a wandering minstrel such as one may still see sometimes in the remoter parts of India. On the shoulder of the hill they separated, Miles going along the path that led through the wood. I thought the lame man went up to the temple, but I must have been mistaken, for when I reached it myself and looked in there was no one there — only the image of the God.

Yet as I stood there I felt a dizzying sense of worlds within worlds unfolding themselves continually, petal after petal, like the opening of a rose; or whirling inwardly upon a hidden centre, in some mysterious involution of their own.

The mild spring weather culminated in a rush of storm, thunder and wind and hail, the most violent I had ever known. It shook and rattled at the ashram, and threatened with its fierce downpours to undermine the very hillside on which it stood. But the site had been well chosen, and though there were many landslips on either side of us, the ashram itself stood firm.

But, as always, the electric atmosphere bred an uneasiness in my mind, resulting in strange dreams and vague fantasies which much disturbed my sleep, even when the storms did not actually keep me awake.

I rose once, or thought I rose, in a sudden lull when the winds dropped, and moonlight shone strangely through clouds suddenly stilled. I put on my warm wrapper and a shawl and thrust my feet into light rubber-soled shoes (leather was not allowed in the ashram) and opened my door. The terrace was very still; even the dripping from the eaves had stopped. For some reason I wanted to go up the hill to the Kashar Devi temple, and I stopped at Miles' door, thinking for a moment of waking him and asking him to come with me. But I could hear his even breathing; evidently neither the storm nor the ensuing stillness had reached him in his quiet sleep. So I left him and went alone.

I had my torch in my hand, but the moonlight was so strangely bright that I did not need it. The gate of the ashram was bolted on the inside, not locked, so I had no difficulty in opening it. I went through, and quickly climbed the path to the road that ran along the ridge. It was only then, looking about me in the open stretches, that I realized no moon was to be seen. It was veiled, perhaps, by the folds of haze which were not quite cloud, and its light diffused in this strange equal radiance that cast no shadow. I was vaguely uneasy, but went on toward Kashar Devi without difficulty; only sometimes treading at the very edge of the road to avoid the rain-water which still lay in vast puddles at its centre. But the hills drain quickly, and by the time I reached the path to the high promontory the slopes were almost dry.

I began to climb. The path looked strange to me in the unusual light, and several times I lost my way. It was much overgrown since I had last come here, but growth is rapid here and it did not surprise me very much. But the path grew more and more unfamiliar, overhung by great trees which I did not recognise; and they at least could not have grown up overnight. They looked centuries old. Their shadows fell sombrely across my way, with a gloom impenetrable as sorrow. Everything was utterly still, with not a sound even of insects, which usually keep up their whirring calls through most of the night, with no stir of wind in those dark trees above me.

But still I went on and I was soon on the high point where the little temple stood. To my surprise the temple was lighted. In fact, all the strange radiance which illumined the landscape, by which I had walked, was centred in the shrine. I hesitated a little, then somewhat timidly went on. But as I came nearer the light slowly faded, or rather gathered itself together into a single ray and withdrew toward the mountains and was gone. I was plunged suddenly in utter darkness there on the wild hillside. And in the darkness I could hear a soul lamenting, not a voice but an anguish of the spirit which I felt in my own heart.

I groped my way to the temple, and found the door open, and I took shelter within it for the rain was beginning to fall again. Then, at a little distance there was a small gleam of light; it came, I thought, from the little cabin where Karuna Ma lived, and as the light moved up towards me, I thought she must be coming up to the temple to pray. The light came near, a dim light in a rude horn lantern, held by some one's hand, but the figure reached the porch of the temple and it was not Karuna Ma.

This woman was tall and gaunt and wild, and old, old as the ages, a figure of infinite sorrow, yet of infinite beauty, beautiful as all the world. My heart was stirred by her as by no other figure I had ever seen.

She set the lantern down upon the temple porch, and then fell upon her knees, her head thrown back, her wild locks falling to the ground, her wasted beautiful hands clasped in an anguish of lamentation.

"He came," she cried, "and I did not know Him. All the time He has been with me, surrounding me, and I knew Him not. The snows were the sweep of His garments. His footfall rustled in the dead leaves at my door, He called me in the cry of the wild swan, the serpent at my feet was His messenger. The world itself was the guide through which I might have found Him. Day by day He passed by me and I knew Him not. He stood at my door, a beggar, with the crescent moon in His hair, and I turned Him from me. The kingdom of His love lay open to me, and I would not enter. Now must I go by back to the beginning of time and learn all life anew. Step by step I must return through the ages. I must find Him through them all. The way is long, oh, long and long and long, yet I cannot be lost there, for all ways are His ways, and the world is His heart."

She knelt still for a moment in silence, bowed down in such a grief and such a beauty as were not of this world. Then she rose slowly. For an instant the light from the lantern shone on her gaunt immortal face, terrible in anguish, then she drew a fold of her ragged cloth softly about her head. She bent and picked up the lantern and went off slowly down the hill. I could see the light flickering here and there until finally it was lost among the trees.

I fell asleep in the shrine, waking with the first sunlight that crept in, warming me a little. I was cold and very stiff. I rose unsteadily, and sat for a moment on the steps rubbing my hands and feet, wondering how, really, I had come there; led by a vision, by some delusion, or merely sleep-walking.

I saw Karuna Ma'a come out of her cabin, a waterpot in her hand, and climb up to the temple. She fumbled in her pocket for the key, but stopped, surprised when she saw the door already open. "I made sure I locked it last night," she murmured, "but the lock is not very firm. Perhaps the wind blew it open." But she looked at me curiously, not quite satisfied.

"Yes, it must have been the wind," I said. "The night was very stormy. I found it open when I came here."

She said nothing more but went into the shrine and knelt down with her waterpot, and began to wash the floor.

I went back down the path which in the morning sunlight look quite as usual, very different from the wild, shadowy way I had climbed in the night.

When I got back to the ashram the servants and Brahmacharis were already about, and some one was coming up from the cowshed with the morning's milk. As I often went out just before sunrise to walk on the ridge, they were not surprised to see me. I went up to my room and lay down on the bed. Soon I was fast asleep for I was very tired.

The next day Miles and Tulasi Devi left on their way to Kailas. I went with them for some few miles along the road. The day was sunny and the hills were fresh and full of bird songs; and great silver-stripe butterflies, their wings flushed with crimson, soared and sailed against the intense sky. The sunlight, filtering through the pines, lay in long streaks on the steep slope of the hills. Miles was singularly light of heart and sang, as he picked his way along the narrow path, an old chant, a prayer for blessing on their way.

"May the winds bring us happiness,
May the rivers carry happiness to us,
May day and night yield us happiness,
May the dust of the earth bring us happiness."

At a steep turn of the road, I left them, and watched them, a moment or two, as they climbed.

Tulasi Devi walked lightly, inexorably, in her own incomparable grace, and never looked back. But Miles turned once and waved to me. I could see his face, strangely luminous, so that it seemed to shine back upon me even from a distance. And perhaps from some trick of shadow on the path, I thought he held a dark flower in his hand. Then they disappeared around a sharp bend, almost as if a way had been opened for them, through the hill itself, to the secret heart of the world.

They had said they would pass our way on their return from Kailas, but they did not come and I never saw them again. Perhaps they never returned. Perhaps they went beyond Kailas to Mount Meru, or even to the White Island, "the source of all the light in the world."

I turned back toward the ashram, but lingered on the way, stopping often to rest, sitting on the stony hillside, my head on my hand, thinking, thinking of many things, of Miles' song :

May day and night yield us happiness,
May the dust of the earth bring us happiness."

Yet what a world was this in which the Gods themselves were lost, plunged deep in anguish, crucified, wandering, benighted!

For me there was still the question.

It was near dusk when at last I saw the ashram beneath me; and standing there on the ridge, I looked back once more at the high summits of the snows, still bright with sunset. And I thought I saw there for a moment, shadowed against them, the vast enigmatic face of the Trimurti of Elephanta.

I saw it blue-throated, crowned with the burning snows, the face of beauty and the face of terror, and between them the smile of inscrutable mystery, remote, tranquil, unanswerable.

As I turned away I saw a woman standing near me, watching me. It was no one I had ever seen before, from the South, I think, for her skin was very dark. She wore a single red cloth, and around both her wrists a red cord was knotted. Her hair was long and matted. Her eyes were sombre and roving, gazing about her fiercely and wildly. Then, tightening one of the cords about her wrist, which had become loose, she went, walking swiftly along the path where Miles and Tulasi Devi had gone.

Then another figure slipped out from among the trees as if he had taken being from the shadow, a tall rather ungainly young man, with a long, lean face and a sharp chin. He wore the gerua robe of the sannyasin, and carried a lota. He stopped by me and I thought he would ask for alms, but he just stood there looking after the dark woman hastening ahead on the path. Then suddenly he smiled, a smile of such incredible beauty that I was startled, reminded of those who had met with angels unawares. He did not follow the woman, but slipped softly back into the shadow, as if to some other world from which momentarily he had made his appearance in ours.

The ashram had a vaguely deserted feeling when I entered, as if Miles and Tulasi Devi had taken something of its spirit with them.

I looked in the temple porch and saw the silent Swami Atulananda sitting there in his usual place, still as a carven statue, as I had first seen him at Tanjore.

I took a mat and spread it out in the opposite corner, and sat down, silently, my eyes fixed like his on the closed door of the shrine.

Whatever truth might be hidden behind it, I had not yet found it out.

For indeed, as the little pilgrim said, it is not of this world.

GLOSSARY

Ashram: a place of religious retreat, either temporary or permanent.

Brahmachari: a novice; one under a vow of chastity.

Bhakti: the way of devotion.

Caddy: a small shop or booth.

Chapatti: flat cake of unleavened flour.

Dagaba: mound-like Buddhist shrine.

Dharmashala: hostel for pilgrims.

Dhoti: loin cloth, reaching to the ankles.

Ghi: clarified butter, used for lamps, temple rituals, cooking, etc.

Gnana: the way of knowledge.

Gerua: orange-yellow or pinkish-yellow cloth, worn by the holy men of India.

Gopuram: tall tower above a temple gate.

Ghats: river-banks, where the dead are burned.

Guru: divinely appointed spiritual guide.

Japam: repetition of the mantram or sacred text.

Kapuwa: one inspired by a god.

Lota: a small water-pot.

Mantram: sacred text, usually one given by the guru to his disciple.

Mudra: ritual gesture.

Pannar: a minstrel (Tamil).

Prasad: food offered in the temple for the blessing of the deity, and then distributed to the worshippers.

Puja: temple ritual.

Rath: temple car; sometimes, as at Mahabalipuram, the temple itself.

Rudraksha: rosary beads, made from the seeds of a tree of the same name.

Salagram: Sacred stone, used in worship of Vishnu.

Sannyasin: holy man; one who has renounced the world, and "taken the gerua".

Sannyasini: holy woman.

Shloka: sacred text.

Shastra: the scriptures.

Sadhu: a sannyasin.

Swami: lord; title used in addressing a sannyasin.

Tali: golden chain which a bridegroom places about the neck of his bride as the seal of their marriage.

Tapasya: ascetic practices.

Vina: musical instrument, banjo-like, made of two gourds with strings stretched above them, and played resting on the ground.

Yal: harp-like musical instrument.

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